

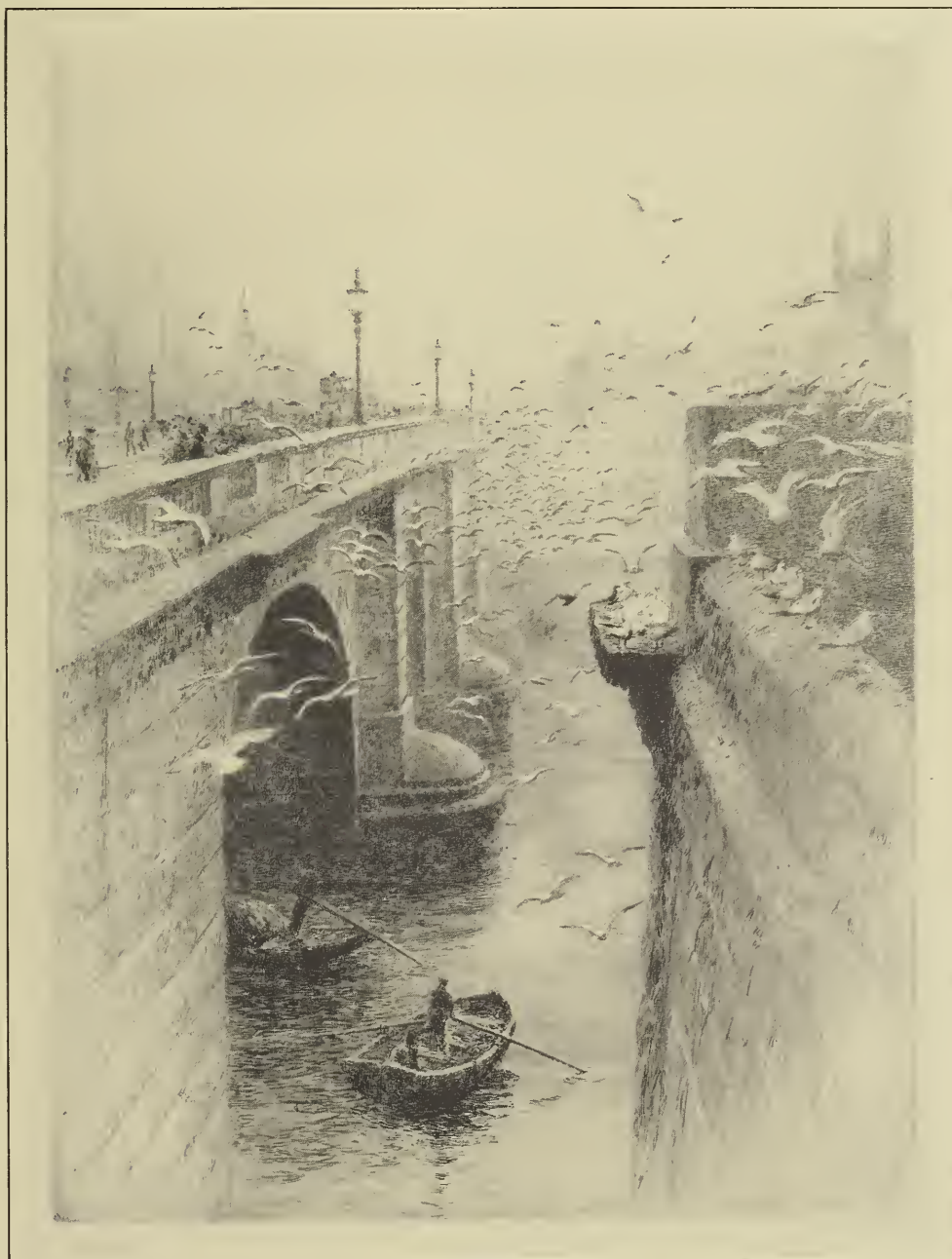
# Four Quarters




VOL. 2, NO. 1


Second Series

SPRING, 1988





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# Four Quarters

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VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1, SECOND SERIES

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## Quarter Notes

WILLIAM VAN WERT

### *The Fall of Saigon*

Writers who are single parents cannot be expected to write long, descriptive paragraphs with lasting philosophical insights in rigid, reaching prose. Children interrupt. They interrupt everything. Their function in life is to interrupt. They do so with ease and elan. I am on the phone, discussing a possible raise in my salary with the Provost at the University, when Ian, who is nine, interrupts me. He wants to tell me a joke. I am paying bills, in the midst of writing a check for the rent, when David, who is seven, interrupts me. He wants to tell me about the latest action figure one of his friends brought to school. I am at the typewriter, tiptoeing through a piece of tricky dialogue in a story, when Daniel, who is five, interrupts me. He bends over and shows me his fanny. He wants to know if he has wiped himself thoroughly.

There are no great American novels left after these interruptions. I am reminded of the Phyllis Diller ditty: "Cleaning house, while kids are still growing, is like shoveling the walk, while it's still snowing."

I cannot even quote Shakespeare, Goethe, Roland Barthes or Lacan. I quote Phyllis Diller. Dr. Seuss. Ranger Rick.

And yet stories are written. Maybe not anthology pieces, but stories, just the same. Notice I use the passive verb. An

overly active lifestyle requires passive verbs. Stories are written. The ownership of these stories never lingers. It is as if someone else wrote them. They seem to have so little to do with each other, and even less to do with the life I'm being led by. Stories from two weeks ago that I'm still revising: "The Pleasure of Anonymity," about Hernando Cortez, who, in his last years, meets Cervantes and helps him write *Don Quixote*; and "The Function of Description," about a blind man, living at Barnegat Light, who falls in love with a librarian in Loveladies. Stories from last week, still in rough draft and not yet revised: "Rugby and Obscenity," about the collapse of a marriage, proceeding backwards, until the narrator is seven at the end and casting images of his future sexuality like lures on a fishing line; "The Eleventh Witness," a story about Bertolt Brecht and the Hollywood Ten; and "Mothers Behind Bars," an ironic story about the emancipation of women, proceeding backwards, toward their inevitable enslavement.

I am currently plotting a story entitled "The Fall of Saigon." I am trying to remember what it was like to have been there, over ten years ago, when that city was still called Saigon and falling, and I was one of the last ones out, long before I had any children. "Let go and flow," my Creative Writing professor in graduate school used to tell us. It is difficult to let go and flow, when the children overgrow like weeds all around me.

"Daddy," Ian asks me. "Did you hear the one about the mother who bought three



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socks for her son, because he told her he had to grow another foot?"

I fall into the literalist trap. Tired, stretched like pregnancy scars, I do not get the joke immediately. I get stuck on the image of three socks.

I go to the bathroom. Action figures are cast about on the tiled floor like an obstacle course. They, too, have taken a bath tonight. But when I sit on the toilet and look up, there is the print of the red-headed nude on the train, by Gustav Klimt. I like this print, this woman curled up in dreams and on a journey, her broad thighs and buttocks dwarfing the entire bottom half of the compartment, her face slightly removed, more distant, more whimsical, wrapped in red hair. I have always thought about the woman as someone *other*: a person who escapes the everyday. Now I realize that she is an extension of my writing, a projection of another self, the me that travels, dreams, curls up to open-ended evenings and relaxed sensuality.

Reverie to reveille. The bugle call of screaming in the other room. I think of the rope around Peyton Farquhar's neck in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." I don't even have time to go to the bathroom.

Children do not exist in the harlequins. Children do not exist in the *nouveau roman*. There is no place for them in hermeneutics. Here and there, a postmodernist child is babysat or rips up *Goodnight*

*Moon* or rides in a speeding car to an uncertain death.

And yet. . .

And yet they grow, outside of time, beyond the focus of my fictions. Elongated, they move with their lunch pails, ducks in a row, and I notice their ankles before I realize the pants on Ian must go to David, and Daniel wears the face David used to wear. They discover moods, they inhabit their moods, and they no longer know what they're thinking when I ask them. Ian wants to interpret his dreams. David wants to discuss his choices for a future career. Daniel wants to talk about death. Ian builds rockets and talks dreamily of the day when he is allowed to handle liquid nitrogen. David plays with pocket calculators, asks about Little League, turns down dessert for the first time in his life. Daniel discovers taboo words, talks about girls as sex objects, throws temper tantrums for no apparent reason. Even their ailments are tiered: Ian has strep throat, David contracts a bronchial cough, Daniel gets a touch of eczema on his stomach.

Cloning proceeds, by its own timetable. Ian begins to look like me: more subtle, more shaggy, more wisened, but still a facsimile. David begins to act like me. He puts his hands in his pockets when I do. And Daniel is like a volcano, emotional eruptions, an unexpected generosity, a sudden selfishness, he bubbles and bursts. He wears his soul upon his sleeve.

They ask about shaving. About writing checks instead of paying cash. About how



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the sewer system works. About how rivers used to look when I was a boy.

They ask about my stories.

And still. . .

And still they surprise me. Ian comes to give me a hug when I am on the phone with the Provost about my salary. David stares at me and winks at me when I look up from paying the bills. And Daniel listens while I type, and, in between the lines of dialogue, I look at him, and he mimes the words, "I love you," as though, if he said them aloud, he might break the typewriter.

Even rites of passage lose their familiarity. For his ninth birthday, Ian asks for a dress-up dinner at a restaurant. He could have gotten hot dogs, a floor show, and tokens for him and his brothers at Chuck E. Cheese, but instead he wants a seafood restaurant, with reservations, coat and tie attire, the two of us. I take him to Seafood Shanty. He orders a Shirley Temple. He is serious about his pound of Alaskan Kings. On his lips the gloss of melted butter when he smiles.

"This grown-up thing," he says, "isn't so tough."

He pulls at his tie, the way athletes squirm on the talk-shows.

My friend Gail, a librarian, once told me that children are like books on loan to us. You can't keep them. They grow, they become more independent, they check

themselves out to other borrowers, besides their parents.

"How are the salary negotiations coming along?" he asks me.

I have flashbacks when I look at him. I remember when he was two, bounding into a field of dandelions, rubbing an entire bouquet against his nose, an applique of yellow, then laughing, the flicking motion of his thumb like a guillotine, decapitating dandelions.

"Mommie had a baby and her head popped off."

Even these flashbacks are like books on loan to us. You can't keep them. You can never keep them intact. They grow as the child grows.





## Quarter Notes

JERRY CROPP

### A Memory Recalled

I don't understand the game. So when Kristin let a ball go without any apparent effort to retrieve it, I chalked it up to disinterest or a lack of aggressiveness. Then a whistle blew and there was a penalty imposed for some sort of infraction or other and Fleetwood had the ball.

Whatever they were doing out there, they were obviously doing it very well. Fleetwood was leading, four to zip. Brandywine had the ball again, and was coming downfield. They moved to the left, two gray-garbed figures, two Quaker-like shapes behaving in a very un-Quaker-like fashion. Kristin didn't hesitate. She slipped between them with a feint to the right, intercepted the ball and slapped it back up-field. Not too far, but far enough that the Brandywine offense had to pull back to regroup. And that was it. A horn sounded and the game was over.

I walked down to the field. Kris said I had to ask the coach before she could ride home with me. Otherwise, she'd have to take the team bus. I asked her why she let that ball go through and she said, rather pointedly, I thought, "She was out of bounds. If I had blocked it and they got my rebound, they could have scored. I let it go and they got a penalty instead."

"Oh."

A light rain had dusted the road back to Fleetwood. We were part of a caravan of

eight or ten cars streaming out of Top-ton, past Grimm's junkyard, past Lyons fire company, out the west end, Deka Battery's new headquarters sitting deserted in the dirt and clutter of new construction.

The road curves gently upward and to the right, up and over the rail tracks linking Reading and Allentown, long iron threads that tie together all the burgs and boros with funny names like Alburts and Macungie and Bowers.

Lights now, brake lights, headlights approaching and slowing as they approached the curve, high beams switching on, taillights swerving to the side of the road. What. . . an accident ahead, that's why the slowing cars. We pull to the side, join the cars ahead of us, as the cars behind join us. Kris and I get out, walk toward the accident, curious, but wanting to help, if we can.

It's a van, top smashed down, lying on its side. And lying on his side, by the road, matching the van in his stillness, a young man. In the field, another. Oh, my God, another and another. All still, all young. Kristin gasps, and starts to cry. She says, "Dad, it's Timmy."

She knows them all, all of them there, lying in the field as the rain comes down. A woman is saying, "Ricky, it's going to be all right. We're here." I ask stupidly, "Has someone called an ambulance?"

A voice replies, "It just happened, they were right in front of us. They hit the guard rail and just started to tumble across the field. We could see them fall-



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ing out." I recognize the voice. It's Amy's mother. Amy plays on the team with Kristin and was in the first car of the caravan. It happened only seconds before. Only seconds before, the still bodies had been celebrating Fleetwood's triumph and now they lay among the barren stalks of newly harvested corn, scattered along the rows like so many missed kernels.

Another voice calls out, "There's one over here."

A truck is in the field now, headlights illuminating the scene. I take Kristin away, she's sobbing and wants to stay, but I tell her there is nothing she can do, we've got to get to a phone and call for

help. Still another voice says, "Here's a sneaker."

Christ, how many were in that van? I run up the skid left by the tumbling van, looking for more. There aren't any. Five will be enough.

I take Kris back to the car. In the distance I hear a siren, a sound I heard long ago waiting on the steps of North Catholic High, waiting for my best friend Tom Abendroth, waiting for Tom to return so we could party, waiting while he bled to death in his crushed car on Erie Avenue.

I hug Kris and tell her everything will be all right.



*It was Dr. Vandervetch who undertook the responsibility to remind possum-players of their call to duty.*

DERVLA MURPHY

## Of Race Relations Here and There

"They won't talk to you," warned a White anti-racist friend. "Here in Britain most Blacks don't talk to Whites. Not unless they're Uncle Toms, and you won't find too many of those in the inner-cities. Or unless they want to make a fool of you—lots of jobless Black kids enjoy that. It's good entertainment, inventing 'disinformation' for solemn White researchers!"

My friend, I soon discovered, was half-right; most inner-city Blacks prefer to avoid White strangers. You must therefore be patient, giving yourself time to become *not* a stranger while recognizing that you are unlikely ever to be accepted as a friend. In the industrialized Midlands, I spent five months in Birmingham's multi-racial Handsworth district—where eventually quite a few blacks did talk to me, openly and at length.

Already I have spent five months in the industrialized North-East, in Bradford's Manningham, where almost the entire population is Pakistani. Both districts share the tragic inner-city problems of mass-unemployment, under-funded and over-crowded schools, inadequate housing and—especially among the younger generation—an increasingly embittered hopelessness. But to me they presented rather different problems. Bradford's 60,000 or so Mirpuris form a remarkably close-knit, self-servicing and aloof community, which explains why many of the older generation speak no English despite a few decades residence in Britain. However, I had the advantage of having known their remote homeland, in Azad Kashmir, during the early 1960s and of being reasonably well-informed about Islam as practiced in that area. As the uncommunicative Blacks' new neighbor, I felt handicapped by never having been to the Caribbean. But several race relations "experts" assured me that this was not important; it seems the West Indies in the 1980s are quite unlike the islands from which thousands emigrated in the 1950s and sixties. And some 50% of Britain's Blacks have never been to the Caribbean either; they are British citizens—British born, British-educated. They have no choice but to regard Britain as their homeland, for all its racist defects.

Looking back, I marvel at my own ignorance-cum-ignorance when I arrived on Britain's race relations scene. The seed-idea for this project had been germinating since 1966 and I was acutely aware of the reality of British racial prejudice and discrimination. But I had not realized—being absorbed in other projects—that during the past few decades British race relations have become both a red-hot (or perhaps I should say white-hot) party political issue *and* the stimulus for a fast-growing government-sponsored bureaucracy with its own vested interests. The Far Left, I found, were stridently and provocatively exaggerating the undoubted difficulties of Blacks and Browns. The Far Right were slyly agitating for the monstrous Final Solution of so-called "repatriation"—though half Britain's colored populations are British-born. However,

my Irish naivete, as a “new girl” on the scene, was not entirely disadvantageous. Quite often, being a fool, I walked in where British liberal angels fear to tread; and some of those rash excursions were instructive.

I soon discerned a fundamental disparity between my definitions of “racism”/“race relations” and the meanings now given to those terms in Britain. Personal observations on four continents have taught me that some form of racism exists in most countries, whether their populations be Black, White, Brown, or Yellow. So it puzzled me to discover that many British anti-racists see White racism (“power-plus-prejudice”) as uniquely evil—and *universal* among Whites. I see it—at least in its British manifestation—as much less pernicious than, for instance, Bangladeshi racial prejudice, which has recently condoned the slaughtering of thousands of inoffensive tribal people (men, women and children) in the Chittagong Hills.

Some of my new friends in Bradford and Birmingham mistook me for a recruit who would zealously support their anti-racist campaigning. They were baffled—and often annoyed—by the fact that my chief interest, as a traveller and writer, is in trying to understand the intricacies of human relationships between individual representatives of the world’s races. This endeavour may occasionally contribute a mite to improved race relations, but it is far removed from the anti-racists’ passionate concern to “eliminate racism from our society.” It seemed to me that their crusade was based on a stubborn disregard for the complex nature of racism, which has led to a dangerous assumption that it can be conquered with the weapons appropriate to a purely political contest.

Two days of serious rioting (serious by British standards) took place during my time in Handsworth. It began when the Lozells Road, a shopping street just around the corner from my bed-sitter, was looted and burned to the ground within ninety minutes. Both the police force and fire brigade were prevented from entering the area by Black petrol-bombers; two Gujarati Muslim brothers were accidentally burnt to death while attempting to save the post-office in their charge; property worth an estimated 16 million pounds was destroyed.

By chance an American friend, who had been a Civil Rights activist while at Berkeley, was then visiting me—staying in a nearby hotel. Before the riot she shared my unease as local tensions palpably increased, day by day. After the riot she commented, “Everyone here seems twenty years behind us in their *attitudes* to race and ghetto problems! And I mean everyone—Blacks and Whites, racists and anti-racists. For any American, Britain now has to feel like a re-run of the ‘60s back home!”

This popular comparison is no doubt valid. The British continue to oppose any form of “positive discrimination,” arguing that it would inevitably sharpen racial antagonisms. Nor can one imagine Englishmen of political stature contributing to an equivalent of the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (The Kerner Report). Yet it can be misleading to take the comparison too far, so dissimilar are the historical backgrounds and relative numbers of American and British Blacks. The former constitute some 12% of America’s population, the latter less than 2% of Britain’s; and as both countries are democracies (or try to be), those figures count.

Negro slaves were, albeit involuntarily, among the earliest settlers on the North American continent. To the extent that time means anything in this context, their roots lie deeper in American soil than those of most White Americans. They contributed so much to the evolution of the USA that contemporary America would be another—and lesser—sort of place but for their presence. And they know this. They know that for centuries they have been an integral part of the fabric of American life. For all the pathetic—and sometimes perilous—emotion stirred up from time to time by Black Power or Back-to-Africa fanatics, most Black Americans are sure of their identity and don't want to alter it.

In contrast, Britain's Blacks are—like the Browns—newcomers, apart from a few small groups long-established in the old seaports. They were encouraged, by Winston Churchill among many others, to migrate to “the Motherland” after World War II when industrial Britain desperately needed extra workers—especially workers docile enough to go on night-shifts and do those “dirty jobs” then despised by the British. Many of their children and grandchildren now claim to be “Black Britons,” though often with a note of defiance in their voices as though they were expecting to be contradicted. And indeed it is plain that whatever the law may say they are *not yet* Britons, in the sense that Black Americans are Americans. The fact that most of their White fellow-citizens do not regard them as truly British naturally discourages them from *feeling* British and cruelly retards their integration.

There are profound differences, with tangled psychological consequences, between the situations of America's ex-slaves and Britain's ex-colonial subjects—though many of the latter were also, for a long period enslaved. Present-day British racism owes much to the Master Race image, cultivated throughout the Imperial centuries of conquering, ruling and exploiting “lesser breeds.” It also owes a lot to the inarticulate fears of the ignorant. For millenia Old England's population has not been massively diluted, though it has been slightly diluted, at irregular intervals, by wavelets of *White* immigrants. Therefore all Britain's conspicuous non-White communities are felt—deeply felt, in the average Englishman's blood and bones—to be intruders. Taken together (and including Chinese), they form only 4.4% of the population. Yet Blacks and Browns are irrationally presented as threats to the cultural and genetic integrity of a compact little nation-state whose traditions were old before ever a White man set foot on the North American continent.

The population of Young America, apart from vestigial Amerindian groups, is entirely composed of immigrants. However much Blacks may have been (or may still be) despised, no race is in fact more an intruder than any other. Looking ahead, it seems that in the U.S.A. there is ample space, both physical and psychic, for Blacks. But in Britain, as many Whites tirelessly emphasize, there is very little physical space left for immigrants of any color: and for Blacks and Browns there is even less psychic space. Granted, Blacks have never been legally discriminated against *within* Britain. The very idea is unthinkable, as was proved by the indignation aroused, during World War II, by the segregation of Black GIs stationed there. (This indignation, though widespread, was not of course universal; many British were happy to have an excuse—“not offending our American allies”—for trying to impose a color bar in public places.) It is also true that Black Britons have not often been verbal-

ly and physically abused as Black Americans commonly were, until quite recently, in the Southern States—where even today “anti-nigger” demonstrations are not unknown. Yet British racism looks set to outlast the American variety. Because it is more insidious the British themselves find it hard to face up to its pervasiveness and subtle cruelties. Here, as in the case of most diseases, a correct diagnosis has to precede a cure and the British have much to learn from the American “experiment with truth.” The bravely honest 1968 *Kerner Report* was of immense significance; it did make a correct diagnosis and some of the treatments it prescribed have already taken effect.

On March 16, 1987 I finished *Tales From Two Cities* and on March 17 (an auspicious date for Irishwomen to begin a journey) my daughter and I flew to Cameroon, West Africa, to spend three months trekking with a pack-horse. I was then in rather poor shape: exhausted, distressed and bewildered by Britain’s confused and confusing race relations scene. But our 1100-mile trek—far from cities, inner or outer, and fuelled by gallons of palm-wine and village maize-beer—soon revived me. Among the Cameroonians “race relations,” in the self-conscious British sense of the term, seemed not to exist; we simply enjoyed being with people who—whatever their tribe or religion—were spontaneously welcoming, helpful and relaxed.

Yet that of course is an over-simplification. Race relations did exist and were always fascinating and sometimes baffling. We had been to Madagascar in 1983, but this was our first experience of Black Africa. (I don’t count my 1967 trek through Northern Ethiopia, which has an ancient and distinctive history and culture.) Not surprisingly, we both found the mental and emotional gulf between White and Black incomparably wider and deeper than that between White and Brown. At first I assumed it must be possible for sympathetic Whites, who live in Africa, eventually to cross this gulf. Then I began to wonder . . . And towards the end of our trek my doubts were strengthened by a splendid Italian priest who has lived in Cameroon for twenty-two years. He was emphatic—“Blacks and Whites never have understood each other and never will. You’ll meet many Whites who claim to understand what makes the Black man tick. But either they’re fooling themselves or trying to fool you. Most Blacks are more realistic—they don’t pretend to understand Whites.”

Many of our encounters with Blacks in a Black country underlined the absurdity of British anti-racist illusions, taboos and ideological posturings. In Bradford and Birmingham I had been forced to delete such words as “tribal” and “primitive” from my vocabulary; in Cameroon we heard these and other allegedly “racist” terms being used daily—by Africans. Where half the population proudly sports facial tribal markings, engraved on the skin, it would seem ridiculous to pretend that traditional Black Africa is anything other than tribal. And where more than half the population lives in mud huts, way beyond reach of electricity, medical care, or postal services, it would seem equally ridiculous to pretend that rural African society is anything other than primitive.

The more rabid anti-racists insist that Black Africa’s development was thwarted only by those greedy imperialists who made off with all the continent’s wealth. Greedy imperialists did indeed make off (and in another incarnation are still making off) with as much of the continent’s wealth as they could lay hands on. Yet repeatedly we were assured by ordinary Cameroonians

that their country had gained as well as lost through being colonized. When I suggested that the losses must have been incomparably greater than the gains, they indignantly accused me of being patronizing and/or sentimental. My attitude, they implied, was based on a romanitic White notion that Blacks would be better off living simple lives, excluded from the benefits of Western civilization.

This is an immensely complicated issue: or at least it then seemed to me, fresh as I was from the pressure of Britain's race relations scene. The original German colonizers of Cameroon (1886-1916) were ruthless in many of their methods—much more so than the French and British, who took over from them in 1918 when Cameroon became two League of Nations Trust Territories. Yet the French and British (especially the British) are condemned for having neglected to develop the region. And the brutal Germans are gratefully remembered because they built roads and railways, established a telegraphic network, provided over 600 schools and several agricultural colleges, devised scripts for a few of Cameroon's 300 or so unwritten languages and enormously extended trading possibilities. Left to themselves, our Cameroonian friends pointed out, the region's multitudinous tribes could *never* have achieved all this. "You people from Europe are so much *cleverer* than us!" they were wont to exclaim—thus innocently blaspheming against the most revered anti-racist doctrine. Always that remark embarrassed me; by now every nicely-brought-up White has been conditioned never to make such comparisons, even inwardly. Yet when one is sitting talking to Africans, in some village virtually unchanged since Mungo Park's day, it would sound merely hypocritical to protest that Whites are *not* cleverer than Blacks in certain obvious respects.

Again, many ordinary Cameroonians (I stress *ordinary*: we avoided cities and so met none of the ruling elite) argued that in South Africa Black majority rule would not work, for either Whites *or* Blacks. In their view, South Africa's high-powered economy needs White organizers. That opinion, if voiced aloud in Handsworth, would start another riot. Yet it is an objective and essentially *non-racist* assessment, based on the Cameroonians' own observations of what happens to sophisticated economic enterprises when Whites withdraw and Blacks take over.

Back in Britain, I remarked to one anti-racist friend that we had felt more at ease among the Cameroonians than we usually do among Black Britons. He retorted, "But you were no *threat* in Cameroon—an African country, run by Africans, policed by Africans, taught by Africans! The whole difference here is that White domination inevitably filters down into every human relationship."

That response highlighted the extreme insularity of Britain's anti-racists, most of whom know nothing about everyday life in Asia or Africa and dwell obsessively on the blissful existence led by Blacks who live in African countries run by Africans. True, Cameroon's Blacks are an immeasurably happier people than their distant cousins—twice uprooted and consistently discriminated against—in Britain. But it is equally true that Cameroon's Blacks are more *threatened* by fellow-Blacks—those who run the country—than any Black in Britain is by Whites. A Black Briton who breaks into a house and steals a television set is imprisoned if caught; a Cameroonian who does likewise is sentenced to death, by firing squad, and is very unlikely to be

reprieved. As for being taught by Africans, all the academically ambitious Cameroonians we met wanted only one of two things—to get out of Cameroon, if they were students, and be taught by Whites; or if they were parents, to get their children into a mission school with White teachers.

At 1 p.m. on June 19 it felt odd to be shopping in Central London; less than twenty-four hours earlier we had been enjoying our last pint of Cameroonian beer in a sleazy but friendly shebeen down a Douala back-street. After the rowdy, chaotic warm-heartedness of Cameroon's biggest (though very small) city, Britain's capital seemed boringly quiet, orderly and impersonal. I felt surrounded (an instant gut-reaction) by *individuals*, each absorbed in his or her complicated and probably stressful personal concerns. In a Cameroonian crowd one seems to be surrounded by vocal, vital extroverts, people who often crack up if they try to survive as individuals, their stability being so dependent on family/tribal supports. They intensely enjoy communicating, sharing jokes, rages, grievances, impressions, suspicions, opinions. In their midst no White need for long remain "a stranger," unless he or she chooses that role. But in our midst any impulsive recognition of another's humanity is rare. No wonder Africans who settle in European cities suffer so grievously from loneliness.

That evening I wrote in my journal:

So where do I go from here? Do I edit my personal observations of life in a Black country, lest they be misinterpreted by British racialists and abused to reinforce prejudices? Or do I let it all hang out, honestly recording both our own reactions and Cameroonian views? That of course is a rhetorical question. I cannot play the narrow British "anti-racist" game when writing about Cameroon.

○○○○

JOYCE CAROL OATES

## Haunted

This morning, Thursday. Waking  
to a heartbeat so intense you thought  
for an instant you hadn't yet been born.

○○○○

A Story by  
ELLEN HERMAN

## Dennis

She might never have thought of him if she hadn't received the postcard. It arrived at her office, the edges dented and worn, the picture cracked in a white line across the surface where it had been folded in transit. The picture was of Amy Carter, who was wearing an orange pinafore, and was holding in her lap a striped cat who looked stunned. "Hey, Claude," Dennis had scribbled on the back. "Thought you'd get a laugh out of this. Can you believe she's in college now? I got it at that old card shop where you bought me the book of Basil Rathbone's letters—remember, the book that had the dead fly squashed in it? (That book was all right, actually, once I scraped off the fly.) I still have the letters you used to write me every day. I keep them in a box under my bed. Hope you don't mind. Just wanted to say hi! Take care—Love, Dennis."

"Oh, God," said Claudia, and laughed helplessly, her hands over her face; then she shook her head. They had met in college and for four years after that, at separate graduate schools in separate cities, they had seen each other on weekends until finally, two years ago, they had broken off with a kind of relief. Dennis had a white, round face with pink cheeks and lips that were always chapped and flaking at the corners. His voice was nasal, hasty; the words fluttered out rapidly, thought after thought, stumbling over and contradicting one another and at last resolving in a long, articulate stream that would leave him panting and eager and blinking, amazed at what he had said. Everything he did, he did in earnest. His earnestness used to make Claudia want to laugh, until after a while she just wanted to shake him. There was something about his voice that used to make her toes itch, something about his gesturing finger, pointed in the air, that used to make her want to grab it, push it down with a triumphant and sinister laugh. Why did he buy plants, even though they always wilted in their pots? Why did he insist on wearing velour shirts? When he came to mind, she laughed; but she was too busy, usually, to think of him.

She smoothed the postcard flat and placed it in her correspondence file, but afterwards on the subway, pressed between the round chest of an elderly man and the skinny shoulder of a heavily perfumed woman, she thought of the letters, four years of her life in a box under Dennis's bed. What if she could have them back? Ridiculous, she thought immediately, and shook her head at her reflection in the rattling dark window in front of her. But even her reflection, hollow-eyed and wavering, seemed bemused, as if it were a shade called up by the letters themselves.

All week through her feverish work she thought of the letters in the brief spells of quiet. Claudia worked in a business in which all transactions were conducted over the phone in a loud voice, with much pounding on the wall, though the gesture could not be seen; she would gulp cooling coffee from a series of paper cups marked with creases of pink lipstick while her restless fingers, trembling with agitation, fidgeted with anything available, twiddling

pencils and roaming over computer keys until her final answer, accompanied by a last punch on the wall now dented and graying from her fist. By noon a film of perspiration would have mixed with the powder on her face and her nail polish would be peeling a little at the edges where she had picked at it during the morning. All the traders ate the same lunch: yogurt. It soothed them. In the bathroom after her yogurt, Claudia would adjust the skirt of her suit, straighten the bow on her blouse, wipe her face with a moist towelette, apply another veneer of lipstick, pat her perm into place and go back to her desk, refreshed. Then a new fact would appear on someone's screen and there would be a rush for the phones, shouting from every room, a race through more statistics, numbers added and subtracted, multiplied by a percentage, mounting as the minutes passed and she hoped for the numbers to go on mounting—would they go? On the phone she would twist her watch, ticking off the minutes: ten minutes before the market closed and would she come in over or under? She would grip the receiver until it grew damp, shake her terminal as though it would cause more information to fall out: five more minutes before the market closed and it was going to be close, it was always close, it could so easily go either way, losing or gaining hundreds of thousands of dollars on the whims of certain key investors abroad whose sentiments it was her profession to predict.

In the evenings she went out for drinks sometimes with the other traders. They all drank heavily, hoisting drink after drink until with a sigh someone would admit that it was time to leave. No one wanted to go. No one had any other life that mattered. Claudia's other life was with Skip, a young lawyer; they had met at a party and their attraction had been instantaneous, due to the interests they had in common: chess, squash, real estate, the cuisine of Northern Italy. Skip was tall and pale, a wave of thin hair falling over his eyes, which were small and watery from contact lenses and often blurred from fatigue, strained over pages of fine print. He spoke through clenched teeth. He was an extremely tense person. In the night, his muscles would clutch inward, causing him to cry out in pain, and he would pace the apartment for the rest of the night sipping milk from a mug.

She was completely happy with her life. It was perfection. Or it would have been perfection—it ought to have been—except for the feeling that this was not exactly what she had expected and that she herself was not exactly what she had expected to become, though she couldn't remember when things had been any different, or what they had been like when they were. She could bring to mind few incidents; with old friends, reminiscing, she would search her mind, shrug, and smile in a general way as if her memories were fond and often handled. It almost seemed sometimes that her happiness was a kind of panic that caused her to run, too pressed by worry to look back. Though wonderful in every way, her life, it seemed at times, had shrunk to the avoidance of obstacles, a life of details. All that week, whenever the trading lagged, she thought about the letters she had written to Dennis. What could she have written about herself? She tried to recall a time when she would have bought someone a book without first examining the pages for marks, holding the cover to the light to check for nicks, wiping with with a rag before wrapping it. She certainly didn't remember buying Dennis a book with a dead fly in it. She had been different then, she thought, but how? What did she think

about, what had she been? She felt like a worm whose head, severed from its body, grows a tail and pushes onward, leaving behind the rest of her, which continued to live in a different place. She tried to remember her hand moving across lined pages, trailing looped script, writing about—what?

On Friday she walked home in the gathering darkness. In the park, the light turned silver on the flat ponds. Boaters, in shadow, splashed their oars and shouted in rowboats under the stone bridges, their voices echoing against the arches sprayed with names and dates and strange remarks that dripped down the walls in black. Skip was, as usual, working late. At home, sitting on the edge of the couch she had a beer and then another, peeling the foil from the neck of the bottle in the orange light of the corner street lamp, and then at last, as she had feared she would, she called Dennis, mainly by persuading herself that it was unlikely that he would be home on a Friday night, and even if he was, she would hang up if he answered; she was just testing.

But he was home and to her surprise she didn't hang up; they talked for three hours. It was hard for her to come to the point, and the longer they talked the harder it became. Dennis told her he had invented a special kind of wire upon which could be etched the most minute coding and for which a computer company had paid him an enormous sum; he was also teaching poetry classes at the local jail, had recently become a Quaker, was trying to learn Chinese and was now living with two stray dogs, several turtles, a duck and two acquaintances who had appeared for a party months before and never left. Though he couldn't say he cared much for them, Dennis couldn't bring himself to ask the acquaintances to leave; after all, he said, where would they go? He told her his apartment was still a mess. He had tried to shampoo the rug and had succeeded only in flooding it with a pine-scented foam that had swept over the carpet and sunk in immediately, leaving a residue like cooked marshmallows that crunched underfoot and stuck to his socks. "I miss you," said Dennis at last, faintly, beginning to cry.

"Please don't," said Claudia, twisting the phone cord between her fingers, her eyes blurring with tears while at the same time she twitched with an unforgivable urge to laugh, and to calm herself she stared at the floor. She hated to bring up the letters but she had to; otherwise he might have the impression that she just wanted to talk to him and that would be wrong. She was afraid her request for the letters would upset him. He lived by an undefined yet rigorous code of honor that he never violated and about which, if challenged, he would become despondent, speaking little and eating candy bars rapidly, without enjoyment. "Dennis," said Claudia, figuring that since he was already crying it couldn't really get much worse, "remember all those letters I sent you for a while?"

"I still have them," said Dennis, sniffing. "They're in a box under my bed."

"I know," said Claudia miserably. "You said so in your card."

"I take them out and read them sometimes," said Dennis. "They're funny."

"Dennis?" said Claudia. Her voice squeaked. She cleared her throat. "What would you think if I came up to Boston to see you and get those letters from you?"

There was a long, crackling pause over the phone. "God," said Dennis. "I'd sure like to see you."

"How about this weekend? Tomorrow?"

"I'll cancel my plans," said Dennis. He inhaled sharply in an excited whoosh of air. "I'd love to see you."

Claudia stared at the phone in disbelief. "Great," she said. It sounded like a question.

"But I'm not giving you back the letters," said Dennis. "They're important to me." And abruptly he let the receiver drop with a clatter.

Claudia lied to Skip about where she was going on Saturday morning. "A business seminar," she said. "In Philadelphia." If no part of the story was true he couldn't find her out, she thought. Her false life would be separate, have its own truth. On the train to Boston she invented the details of her illusory trip, selecting a hotel, thinking of anecdotes pieced together from previous incidents as yet untold. She imagined herself looking down into the dirty green water of the Schuylkill River and standing surrounded by pigeons in the courtyard of the baroque city hall, a building luminescent and weathered as a tall ship.

When the train pulled into the station in Boston she saw Dennis standing at the end of the platform in the murky light of the station, which fell from above through slanted windows painted over in a green the color of mildew. The air was as thick and dim as water in an aquarium and Dennis, like a solemn, elderly blowfish, stood with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, waiting by himself. He looked dazed. Claudia, pulling down her bag, regretted that she had come and stood swallowing, hidden behind the smoked windows, while the other passengers bustled forward, filled with urgency, and pushed past her with the suitcases. All right, said Claudia to the headrest of the seat in front of her, how bad could it be? And she walked out of the train, waving.

Dennis was looking at his feet when she came up to him. When she said his name he started, blinked and turned red. "Aha!" he said, clutching her arm. She didn't know whether it would be right to hug him, but after patting him on the sleeve of his jacket, she felt ridiculous and hugged him. He shook himself when she held him and then clutched her to him, swaying. "Dennis," said Claudia to his jacket, gently, after a time. "I don't want to give you the wrong impression."

"It's been a long time," said Dennis, but then he let her go and they went upstairs and outside. Dennis was talking frantically, in his usual way, his fingers stabbing the air in front of him while he spoke, licking his lips and inhaling in gasps, talking about the traffic, the bad weather, the crazy Boston drivers, the great distance at which he had been compelled to park. Dennis still drove the same rusting Datsun he had bought one weekend when she was visiting him, and which inside was cold and smelled like old rubber boots. On the floor, muddled scraps of paper, leaflets and index cards lay pressed into the mat, imprinted in dust by the soles of sneakers. Jolting, they drove through town. Dennis had become anxious and spoke little except to mutter when the car jerked to a halt and stalled in intersections. Claudia, glancing at Dennis from time to time, observed that he had developed lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth, that his cheeks were less flushed than they had been and that his hair seemed short—hadn't it been longer before? She wasn't sure. Ill at ease, she spoke continually, barely pausing to breathe as they drove through town past the river and out into Brookline.

Dennis lived in the back part of an old frame building, colorless and sag-

ging with age, whose windows were made of glass so old it was thick and rippled as water in the sun. "Home again," said Dennis as he parked in a minuscule space wedged between two station wagons. The car, tired of maneuvering, sputtered and died, and they left it jutting out into the street. "If anyone wants it they can have it," said Dennis, banging a door with his fist and then adding, perhaps to the car, "Nah."

His apartment had its familiar smell of dog hair and turtle droppings. There was a clamor of barking and quacking as they walked in, and two ancient dogs, baying in exultation, leapt at them, snuffling with happiness. Piles of books lay in corners along with wadded piles of clothes and wet towels, probably months old; pieces of paper with dates and phone numbers and random thoughts were taped to the walls in various places marked with smudged fingerprints. "Where's Barney?" asked Claudia.

Dennis looked at the floor. "Barney's dead," he said at last. "I'm sorry." He squeezed her hand.

"That's okay," said Claudia, who had always hated Barney; he had chewed off the handle of her suitcase once and thrown it up on her lap.

"It was awful," said Dennis. "I had to put him to sleep. He was a great dog. I know how you loved him."

"Yeah," said Claudia with a sigh. On his bookshelf Dennis had a picture of them together in front of some vast, empty beach in the winter. Huddled in their coats, they were both laughing; Claudia's hair blew around her head and her nose was red. "Who took this?" she asked. "Where were we?"

"Maine," said Dennis. "A few years ago. That old guy took it, remember? He was wearing those crazy walking shorts with the leather suspenders and he was talking to himself. He was a good guy, though. He kept telling you what great teeth you have."

"I sort of remember that," said Claudia, though she didn't.

"You do have great teeth," said Dennis.

They were sitting in Dennis's kitchen after dinner drinking instant coffee and eating cookies from a bag by the time Claudia could bring herself to mention the letters. The hairless Irish setter had nosed its head into her lap and sat there, eyes closed, his black, wet nostrils flaring with each breath, content. "So you have my letters," said Claudia casually, scratching the dog between the ears and watching his bare pink tail thump against the floor.

"Of course I do," said Dennis, smiling, looking too much into her eyes with a sheepish look that made her recoil and involuntarily grip the dog's ear until he yelped and lumbered off to heave himself to the floor and sleep in another corner of the room, where in a plastic outdoor pool the duck paddled around and around in shallow water.

"I'd like to get them back," said Claudia firmly.

"Let's talk about that tomorrow."

"I feel like we should talk about it now," said Claudia, looking at the floating scum of oil swirling in her coffee.

"Okay," said Dennis. "We can talk about them." He took a deep breath. "I don't think it's fair that you want them back. You can't just take back everything you gave me. That's not the way it's supposed to work. They're mine."

"But they're not," said Claudia. "They're mine. I wrote them. They're about

me."

"But you wrote them to me," said Dennis, beginning to sputter, his fingers pointing at his own chest. "To me. I'm not giving them up." He took a bite of his cookie. Crumbs spilled down his chin and onto his shirt. "That's settled. Let's talk about something else, okay?"

Claudia found herself infuriated. Sitting up so fast the coffee sloshed over the edge of the cup and splashed on the back of her hand, she knew that he was under a terrible misimpression. "Dennis," she said, "I didn't come here just because I wanted to see you."

"You don't need a reason to see me."

"But I have one," said Claudia, petulant, torn as always with Dennis between compassion and profound irritation. "For God's sake, Dennis, I came here to get my letters back—I don't want to see you, Dennis," she said urgently, straining to make him understand, "I have another life. I have a boyfriend, I have a job, I have everything—I have another life!" she said, wanting to shake him by the lapels of his cardigan—what kind of man wore a cardigan, anyway? She glared at it, outraged, but it made her laugh and she had to look away.

"I guess I knew that," said Dennis finally. His fingers, all set before him on the table, tapped absently some phantom bit of music. "Yeah," he added with a sigh. The tip of his nose reddened and he sniffed; a tear wobbled down his cheek. "Aw, dammit," said Dennis, standing up and turning away, his forehead pressed to the window. She was afraid he would sob—Dennis was prone to sobbing, she remembered—but he did not, just stood in silence while around him the darkening window fogged with his breath. "I went out with someone," he said slowly, "for six months but it didn't work out. She wasn't you."

"You have no reason to like me so much, Dennis," said Claudia, pleading, exasperated. "You're too nice for me."

"You're the nicest person I ever met," said Dennis, and then he began to sob.

His crying gave her the wild urge to scream. It made her desperate. "Dennis, please, for God's sake I am not nice," said Claudia, begging, thinking he did not know her, he had never known her, he did not know what kind of a person she was. The naive mistaken faith he had in her, had always had in her, made her angry as if at some lost self that had existed in Dennis's fond imagination and which she had believed in also, wanting so badly for it to be true, but it wasn't; that was at another time that was over now and could not be brought back. How could he still think of her that way? Inexplicably, she too began to cry, with a twisting sadness, the tears splashing in dots across the linoleum table.

They cried together for a long time, until they were tired out and sat in silence. Claudia sat with her head on her arms and her nose to the linoleum, listening to herself breathe. The two acquaintances came in, talking in loud voices, pulled cans from the refrigerator, grunted at Claudia and Dennis and threw themselves on the living room couch, where they watched the news. "They're good guys," said Dennis in an undertone when Claudia gave him a significant look. "They're okay."

Claudia just shook her head. Her eyes were gathering tears again. Dennis, who had sat down in the chair across from her, moved with a scraping of chair legs on the floor closer to her and clasped one of her hands in his two chub-

by pink ones. He sniffled in short gasps and sighed. In its pool in the corner, the duck honked mournfully. And at last, with a sigh almost of resignation, she bent forward and kissed him.

It was strange and sad in a familiar way, Claudia thought the next morning, like spending a night in a house where she had once lived. She woke up with the first light trickling down through the window high above, spattered with dust from dried rain which made the early light fall in streaks on the blanket. Dennis was lying with one arm tucked around her middle, the wind from his snores blowing in warm gusts on the back of her neck. She slid out from under his arm, eased herself out of bed and dressed herself, shivering, without waking up Dennis. In the dim room she stood for a long time with her arms hugged across herself while the light grew gray in the windows and fell in a slant to the bed, where Dennis, under a heap of blankets, wheezed in his sleep through his perpetually clogged nose. His heavy pink arm dangled off the edge of the bed.

She could see the box of letters underneath. Kneeling by the bed, she pulled it out, slowly, her eyes closed as she prayed that Dennis would not wake up and he didn't, though once he grunted and shifted in his sleep. The box was soft and dusty, with frayed edges. Standing up, she cradled it in her arms like a baby. Then she got her things and stole out without leaving a note, knowing that Dennis would understand, when he woke up, what she had done, and he would forgive her, as he always did.

It was fully day by the time she got to the train station; she was sweating in her coat from the long bus ride into the city with the box, which was an awkward size and heavier than it looked. By the time she found a seat on the train, her arms were shaking from the weight of the box and she was drained and hollow with exhaustion. It was one of those absolutely still days in early spring when the air is a pale and shimmering blue that washes out the fronts of buildings and the bare branches of trees, which seem to tremble with hope in the new sun. Claudia sat with her box of letters, warmed. The letters would bring everything back to her, herself, what she had been and what she wasn't anymore. But she would have it back, this missing self; it was in her hands now, returned, and as the train passed through Providence she opened the box, pulled out the first letter and began to read.

OOOO

CLAUDE KOCH

## Master of the Gate of Horn: An Interview With Andrew Lytle

"Now that I have come to live in the sense of eternity"—so begins Andrew Lytle's *A Wake for the Living*, that chronicle as unique as *The Education of Henry Adams*. He has pursued with single-mindedness and grace the "two eternities" sung by Yeats, "that of race and that of soul"—as distinguished novelist (*The Long Night*, *At the Moon's Inn*, *A Name for Evil*, *The Velvet Horn*), editor (*The Sewanee Review*), and as Professor at Southwestern College and the Universities of the South, Iowa, and Florida.

To his many fellowships and honorary degrees has recently been added the Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters, that prestigious Ingersoll Prize given by the Rockford Institute. These are public notices that celebrate in him a paradigm of artist and teacher. But those who know Andrew Lytle are quite aware that his greatest honor is one no institution could offer him, one that must be earned out of the public eye, and that he has earned: the grace to see life whole, the warrior's grace to be merry in spite of loss and pain, the grace of Thomas More. It is this grace that infuses his work as it has his life, illuminating the two eternities that have become—through meditation and labor—the matrices of the life and the work.

—Claude Koch

*Q: Many years ago you directed a number of young men (myself among them) toward "craft and vision." If you could, with hindsight, speak to those young men again, what would you say that would not have occurred to you then?*

The common vexation in writing is to find the proper conditions in which to do it. I would still say: sit down in the same place, same time, every day and there put yourself away from yourself. Only by this means do you enter the imaginary out of which you draw your artifact. Do the day's stint; revise the next day under the same conditions and, on this base, continue. Keep this up until there is too much reading. Repeat the procedure. If interrupted, say by a tractor misfiring in the field, give up the work for the day. Rarely are you able to leave one world and enter another twice in the same day.

I don't remember altogether how I taught. Different apprentices require different attention. The young man I was is not the old man I am. No artist in after years can revise his earlier work without violation. An unfortunate example may be found in my old master, John Crowe Ransom. He changed some of his earlier poems to a milder and less ironic meaning. The earlier poems remain. The revisions must be read as differing treatments on the same theme.

There are a few things that are constant. Read literature, especially under a sympathetic master. I would not today use the word create. Only God creates. His creature observes and imitates what is before him, that is the irreducible

objects in the cosmos, more narrowly the human and natural ones which will concern the subject. No artist can reduce to his own definition what God has made. The artist sees a part that seems a whole. Form as it enters the mind is spirit? spiritual? angelic? The completed form becomes visible only after (through sight) substance has filled and hardened it. In fiction the completed action renders the completed form. There can be millions of views of an oak tree. The whole remains with God, the Creator.

It will be harder to teach now, harder to be a craftsman. The machine multiplies itself. I, a young man, was closer to the high days of Christendom than I would be to my students. They will know little history, no mythology. Few will have read the Bible. I wonder if Ancient History is anywhere taught today, or was it lost with Latin and Greek and Hebrew? Our common references would be few. We all live in a world that is the husk of itself. Matter is all. Spirit hovers like a vapor. If you told these students they were creatures along with flora and fauna, they would ask what do you mean. What is fauna? Remind them that man is made and not begotten. No doubt the reply would include a four letter word they could do. What a terrible shock is awaiting them when they discover that before the mystery of life and death they are merely agents.

*Q: You know both the academic and the writer's world. Many of your former students have entered the former and continue to write. Do you see an obstacle or an advantage in the combination of the writer and teacher on the part of the representative talented youth?*

The obstacle would be how to divide your time between two disciplines. You can manage two things regularly, not three, at least I can't. If you don't prepare your lessons, the students know it at once. The days I taught I rarely could write. You can give an examination, but you can't every day. I used to advise students to take philosophy. I would change that now to languages. Philosophy deals in truth but it is abstract and won't give you the feel of the concrete as working with words does. You can't know enough as an artist, so anything you learn helps. The larger advantage makes you acquainted with literature. Teaching brings the writer and teacher together where learning and the arts are always present. This is a firm support. It is hard to be a craftsman alone, particularly in a hostile atmosphere. Our world is one of the machine, and that means technology and all its half-truths. The final answer is this: not only an army marches on its belly. A writer needs food and drink and shelter. You do what is at hand, what you can find to do that leaves you some time for your proper work.

*Q. James's "try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" is excellent advice. How does one become such a person?*

"Nothing" is ambiguous. To try to be such a person would divert you from your proper subject. If it means to respond to whatever you see or hear, you will never write a line. Selection is crucial to a craft. Obviously James meant the artist to be alert but as a disciplined artist. He himself never listened to the end of a story or anecdote, only to the part of it which would set his own imagination to work. The anecdote is history. You can't rewrite it.

*Q. Your memory is ancestral and literary. Is that combination likely to be a virtue in the Southern writer today?*

This is a hard question. It is doubtful. You must consider that the South was destroyed by war, not a civil war. There is no such thing. It was a war of conquest and loot. It was the conquest of a free people who have had superimposed upon them a history not their own, a secular educational system not controlled by the community but by professional groups interested in power. The result is becoming plain to all of the states by means of an education failing to educate. It doesn't take but one bad idea to ruin a man or a state. Behind the South's defeat was the fight between two kinds of rule: a numerical majority controlled by a self-interested minority; or the stable traditional aristocracy of feudal Christendom, which the South being a religious people inherited from England. Opposed to the fact of an aristocracy is a democracy, which this country technically does not have. We have a plutocracy masquerading as a rule of the people, who in a democracy must all be on hand to vote. The fantasy that all people are equal is unnatural. There are no two blades of grass the same, certainly not two people. More and more our democracy is approaching an ochlocracy. Money has replaced Christ as the loving image. The structure of the West remains Christian, but Christendom in its Satanic phase. The lie that men are essentially all good is added to the fantasy that men are all equal. The failure to show this goodness is explained by a temporary lack of harmony in the ordering of the state, which eventually some five-year plan will remedy. Progress, a religion without a god, has replaced God. It is criminal to pray. This secular fantasy promises a perfectibility of man who presumably will become a god and never die. But the only progress that nature knows is seasonal: spring, summer, fall, and winter, the dead season, so far as we know perpetually renewed; or birth, youth, middle age, old age and death. We may never recover from the French Revolution.

There is some hope, but I'm not sure this hope will restore for the writer a knowledge of our European inheritance or the understanding of literature. We are being infiltrated by too much of the Northeastern materialism. This East has known only worldly triumphs. Defeat has taught the South the nature of the world. The East is suffering defeats now, but it doesn't know what to do. It may well be that not only the South but the rest of the country may be saved by the South's knowledge: you can lose. The South has shown also that it knows how to keep its sense of itself, and its belief in Christianity, if taken in often by false cults and liberal men.

*Q. You have devoted a lifetime to an ideal and a craft. What can you say are the rewards for this dedication at this moment of your life?*

If reward there is, you learn that sometimes you can write a sentence that says what you think you intended. And you hope that there are enough to make the body of your work hold up. Being a Tennessean and a Southerner, I cross my fingers.



EDWARD CALLAN

## *Cry, the Beloved Country:* Forty Years On

It is now forty years since Alan Paton's novel of South Africa, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, was published in New York on February 2, 1948. As a first novel by someone then unknown in America, it had little advance publicity. But eminent New York reviewers noticed it; readers recommended it to one another; and sales increased rapidly. In time, Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill produced a musical version: *Lost in the Stars*; and Alexander Korda filmed it. During the four decades since it was written, the novel has sold millions of copies, and has continued to hold reader interest, worldwide, through translations in some twenty languages. These included the South African languages of Zulu and Afrikaans.

Not surprisingly, *Cry, the Beloved Country* had a mixed reception in South Africa where it did not become generally available—in the London edition from Jonathan Cape—until after the fateful election of May 1948 that brought the Afrikaner nationalist to power. Many English speakers admired the book—particularly for the beauty of its lyric passages; but many were also affronted by its picture of the plight of urban Africans which they deemed sentimental or propagandistic. A much higher proportion of Afrikaans speakers disliked it—and more intensely—for the same reasons. With one exception—*Die Burger*, Cape Town—no Afrikaans language newspaper reviewed Paton's novel. Had they read it, many Afrikaner nationalists would have disbelieved its picture of South Africa—as did Mrs. D. F. Malan, wife of the Prime Minister, who said to Paton at the South African premiere of the film: "Surely, Mr. Paton, you don't really think things are like that?"

The more passionately intense response of Afrikaners to anything deemed critical of white South Africa has a long history—summed up by Paton in *Time* magazine of May 4, 1987. Accounting for the less defensive posture of English speakers, he said: "We never trekked, we never developed a new language, we were never defeated in a war, we never had to pick ourselves out of the dust." And he continued: "The English here don't want to rule everything and everybody. Both Afrikaners and English have a love of country, but the Afrikaner's love is in general more fierce, more emotional, more aggressive. It is his history that has done it to him." Insofar as these remarks may suggest that it is possible to love the land too deeply, they evoke an echo of the passage in his novel from which the title derives: "Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply."

Alan Paton was born in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, some seven months after the Boer War ended. His father, a Scottish immigrant, was a court stenographer and an aspiring poet. His mother's people were third generation British settlers in Natal. His earliest memories were of delight in the beauty of the

world around him—in the brightness of its flowers and the song of its birds. He came to delight in words, too; and in stories, including Bible stories, read to him by his parents who adhered to a strict Christian evangelical sect, the Christadelphians.

Paton started school at an early age and moved rapidly through the grades, always smaller and younger than his classmates. A student leader at Natal University College while majoring in physics and mathematics, he also wrote verse and drama for the student magazine. In 1924 he was sent to England to represent the college at an Imperial Student Conference, and returned to teach mathematics at the high school in Ixopo where he met and married Dorrie Francis in 1928.

While teaching at Ixopo and, later, at Pietermaritzburg, Paton wrote, and discarded, two novels of white South African life. At about the same time, through a common interest in organizations like YMCA, and in summer camps for disadvantaged white youths, he met Jan Hofmeyr who was to become South Africa's most prominent liberal statesman—and whose biography Paton was to write.

In 1934 Hofmeyr held the cabinet portfolios of Education and Interior. He introduced legislation transferring responsibility for reformatory institutions from the Department of Prisons to the Department of Education. When supervisors were sought to transform the three existing reformatories into schools, Paton applied and was offered Diepkloof, a large black reformatory in Johannesburg that then housed 400 boys age nine to twenty-one. Its buildings were old—Mahatma Ghandi had been jailed there in 1913—and the sanitary arrangements were primitive. The boys were unable to use even these at night, but were locked in, twenty to a cell, with a container of water and a bucket for bodily needs. There was little in Paton's background to prepare him for the task of transforming this virtual prison into a school. Yet, within three years, he was able to report: "We have removed all the more obvious aids to detention. The dormitories are open all night: the great barred gate is gone."

Paton changed Diepkloof into a place where boys could attend school and learn a trade, and where those who had proved trustworthy could accept paid outside employment. With no precedent to follow, he decided to use freedom as his instrument of reform. Newcomers were housed in "closed" dormitories. If they proved themselves trustworthy they were transferred to cottages under the care of a house-father and house-mother. In time, free boys were allowed to visit families and friends on weekends; and some—like Absalom Kumalo in *Cry, the Beloved Country*—were permitted to live and work outside Diepkloof. Of the ten thousand boys given home leave during Paton's years at Diepkloof, only one percent did not return. One of these killed a white woman who surprised him in the pantry of her home—a circumstance that, no doubt, inspired a somewhat similar incident in *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

Not all observers of Paton's Diepkloof experiment were impressed by its success. Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, editor of *Die Transvaler*, who was later to become South Africa's Prime Minister, described it as "a place for pampering rather than education, the place, indeed, where one said *please* and *thank you* to black *misters*." In 1958, the year that Dr. Verwoerd became Prime Minister, Diepkloof was closed down; and its 800 boys were scattered to their home areas where they were set to labor on white farms. Diepkloof now survives

only as a fictional locale in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and in some of Paton's short stories.

Although Paton volunteered for service in World War II, he was not permitted to enlist. When the war ended he decided to equip himself better professionally, and to this end he undertook a tour of penal institutions in Scandinavia, Britain, Canada and the United States at his own expense. On arriving in England in July, 1946, he attended an International Conference of the Society of Christians and Jews as a delegate of the South African branch. In September he began his tour of penal institutions in Sweden. He read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* while in Stockholm, and when he began writing his own novel he adopted its method of representing dialogue by a preliminary dash. He took advantage of his proximity to Norway to visit Trondheim and the locale of a Norwegian novel that interested him, Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*.

Traversing the unfamiliar evergreen forests of the mountainous border landscape he grew nostalgic for the hills of Natal. At the hotel desk in Trondheim an engineer named Jensen came to his aid and interpreted for him, and later showed him Trondheim cathedral where they sat for a time in the fading light before the serene beauty of the great rose window. Jensen then brought Paton back to his hotel and promised to return in an hour to take him to dinner. In the course of that hour, moved, as he says, by powerful emotion, Paton wrote the lyric opening chapter beginning: "There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. . . ." At that juncture he did not know what was to follow. He had sketched no scenario for a novel.

But no formal scenario was necessary. The problem of the decay of tribal culture, the poverty of the reserves, and the flight of people to already overcrowded urban centers—all themes of *Cry, the Beloved Country*—had occupied his mind for a long time. A few months earlier he had written urgent articles on the causes of crime and delinquency among urban Africans for the Johannesburg journal, *Forum*. In these, he warned against the tendency to ignore the underlying causes of African crime which he traced to the disintegration of tribal life and traditional family bonds under the impact of Western economy and culture.

Paton continued work on his novel, mostly at night, while following a demanding schedule of travel and of professional meetings and visits. He wrote it in hotels and on trains in Scandinavia and England; during an Atlantic crossing on the liner *Queen Elizabeth*; and again while traveling from city to city in America. He finished it on Christmas Eve in San Francisco, California. There, at a meeting in the offices of the Society of Christians and Jews, he met Aubrey and Marigold Burns who befriended him, read his manuscript, and determined to find him a publisher.

Paton has said that he wrote his story as he began it, in the grip of powerful conflicting emotions. On the one hand he felt compelled to turn it into a cry against injustice in South Africa. On the other, he felt drawn to imbue it with a yearning for justice. The first emotion is most evident in *Book One*, the story of the old priest, Stephen Kumalo, who journeys from his remote tribal village to search for his lost son in the black townships like Newclare (called "Claremont" in the novel) and Orlando on the west side of Johannesburg near Diepkloof Reformatory. (Today, the vast segregated city that oc-

cupies the general area of these "South West Townships" is known by the acronym, Soweto.)

The contrary emotion, the sense of the yearning for justice, pervades the Jarvis episodes of *Book Two*. Here, the spirit of Abraham Lincoln is palpably present. In particular, Lincoln's companionable ghost haunts the study of the murdered man, Arthur Jarvis, whose father—a man of little reading—is astonished to find a whole bookcase full of books about Lincoln. Browsing in these, he reads the Gettysburg Address and, later, the Second Inaugural. Some of his subsequent actions are motivated by these readings—something readers who do not carry Lincoln's words at Gettysburg and in the Second Inaugural in their memories may miss; for Paton does not supply them.

Paton had written these episodes during his stay in Washington, D. C. There, the Lincoln Memorial impressed him as "a temple erected to the spirit of man at its highest and purest." As he described his visit to it:

I mounted the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with a feeling akin to awe, and stood for a long time before the seated figure of one of the greatest men of history, surely the greatest of all rulers of nations, the man who would spend a sleepless night because he had been asked to order the execution of a young soldier. He certainly knew that in pardoning we are pardoned.

There are characters in *Cry, the Beloved Country* who seek to emulate "the spirit of man at its highest and purest": but Ideal Justice, however yearned for, is beyond direct human experience. Its reflection may be glimpsed in Lincoln's guiding principles; or in the serenity of a perfected work of art like the rose window at Trondheim; or in such ineffable visions of peace as Isaiah's: "where the wolf lies down with the lamb and they do not hurt or destroy in all that holy mountain." In his "Preface" to the Collier Books edition of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Paton quotes a passage from his memorial for his first wife, *For You Departed* (1969). In it he expands on his description of the novel as a yearning for ideal justice: "it is informed with a longing for the land where they shall not hurt or destroy in all that holy mountain." And he concludes: "It is a story of the beauty and terror of human life, and it cannot be written again because it cannot be felt again."

It is not surprising that some episodes in *Cry, the Beloved Country* should reflect admiration for Lincoln. Indeed there may have been almost as many books on Lincoln in Paton's study in far away South Africa as in the fictional study of Arthur Jarvis. Nor is it surprising that an aura of hope should pervade the novel as a whole. In 1946 there were hopeful signs that South Africans—and particularly the returning war veterans—were prepared to accept new departures in race relations. It also seemed likely that Parliament would accept—and implement under Jan Hofmeyr's leadership—the liberal report of a commission investigating urban conditions. No one then anticipated the 1948 election victory of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party that ushered in an intensified policy of racial separation—not even the Nationalist Party itself.

In the novel, therefore, the voices of apartheid's advocates are heard only with an undertone of satire: "And some cry for the cutting up of South Africa

without delay into separate areas, where white can live without black, and black without white, where blacks can farm their own land and mine their own minerals and administer their own laws."

The obvious reason for the merely incidental presence of these voices in the novel is that *Cry, the Beloved Country* does not present an overview of South Africa on a broad canvas in the manner of James Michener's *The Covenant*. There is nothing in it, for example of the spirit of the Afrikanerdom that informs Paton's second novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*. Instead, it brings into focus the migration of impoverished Africans from rural and tribal areas that increased during World War II, and it depicts with remarkable realism a slice of Johannesburg life as it was in 1946. In that year, public events that made newspaper headlines included the excitement caused by the discovery of new gold, the courageous black boycott of buses, and the rebuilding of a squatters' shanty town.

While the four intervening decades have brought great change, the circumstances of 1946 depicted in this novel have not lost their power to hold the imagination. This may derive from enduring qualities in the work. But it may also derive from an effect of history that affords present-day readers a perspective on the novel in some ways comparable to that of audiences in the Greek tragic theater who know the outcome of the fateful struggle unfolding before them. Such foreknowledge quickens the emotions of pity and terror that Aristotle thought proper to tragedy. For readers of this novel conversant with South Africa's intractable social problems, what once seemed merely ominous, may now appear to foreshadow tragedy.

For example, the question raised about the eloquent but cautious agitator, John Kumalo, carries with it a sense of impending violence: "What if this voice should say words that it speaks already in private, should rise and rise and rise, and the people rise with it, should madden them with thoughts of rebellion and dominion, with thoughts of power and possession?" And when the young black priest, Msimangu, reveals his fear of hardening racial attitudes, readers may feel themselves in the presence of events unfolding towards some inevitable denouement: "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating."

In the late summer of 1948—some six months after the American first edition—*Cry, the Beloved Country* was published in England with the subtitle, "A Story of Comfort in Desolation." It again met with popular and critical approval, and it was accorded a "Special Book Award" from the *Times* of London. Its success—and the National Party's election victory—emboldened Paton to resign his government post and devote himself to writing. He said in a broadcast talk: "I have left the public service, but not with any intention of living in idleness or ease. I want to interpret South Africa honestly and without fear. I cannot think of any more important or exciting task."

At first things went relatively well. He soon produced his second novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*, and a number of short stories—some of them based on his Diepkloof experiences. But an unforeseen event had meanwhile intervened to change his life again. In May, 1948, one month before his resignation from Diepkloof was to take effect, the Afrikaner National Party came to power and instituted their policies of apartheid. At this juncture Liberal-minded South Africans looked to the leadership of Jans Hofmeyr. But before the end of 1948

Hofmeyr died, aged only fifty-three. "And so," as Paton said, "a great light went out in the land making men more conscious of its darkness."

In 1953 Paton agreed to give up the privacy and detachment of a writer's life and to join with others in formally establishing a Liberal Party to present a non-racial alternative to the Nationalist Government's racial policies. In 1956 he was elected Chairman and was later its President. The party's long-term aim was to achieve without violence a democratic South Africa where all shared full rights and responsibilities. Initially, most of its members were white; but, in time, blacks constituted the majority.

The party soon drew the Government's wrath and repressive power. Dr. Voerwoerd had foreshadowed its future when he told Parliament in 1958 that when South Africa became a Republic (achieved in 1961) there would be "no place for Liberal or similar parties which wish to place white and non-white on equality." And his Minister for Justice, Mr. J. B. Vorster, frequently told Parliament that "Liberals were more dangerous than communists," and were "wittingly or unwittingly, the prime promoters of communism." When Paton appeared in court at the close of Nelson Mandela's treason trial in June, 1964, to plead in mitigation of the sentence because he feared that Mandela and those convicted with him would be sentenced to death, the Prosecutor declared he would "unmask" Paton and taunted him by demanding, "Are you a Communist?" and "Are you a fellow-traveler?"

Lacking a significant parliamentary role, the liberals opposed apartheid in whatever way they could. Paton, for example, turned essayist and pamphleteer; and, among other things, he helped establish a fund to pay the legal costs of Chief Lutuli and others charged with treason in 1956. In the emergency following the Sharpeville shootings in 1960, this was broadened into the Defense and Aid Fund, subsequently banned. The Liberal party itself was decimated by bannings and restrictions on its members in the 1960's, and it was dissolved in 1968 by legislation prohibiting racially mixed political gatherings. Not all of the party's tribulations could be attributed to Government ill-will. A few young members and former members turned secretly to violence and carried out a senseless series of bombings. Consequently, the general membership had to endure the knowledge that many of their sacrifices in the cause of non-violent change had been largely nullified.

The Liberal Party had few triumphs, but it had an occasional lifting of the spirit. This was the case in 1960 when Paton was honored by Freedom House, New York, with its Freedom Award. In presenting the award, the poet Archibald MacLeish said of him:

To live at the center of the contemporary maelstrom; to see it for what it is and to challenge the passions of those who struggle in it beside him with the voice of reason—with, if he will forgive me, the enduring reasons of love; to offer the quiet sanity of his heart in a city yammering with the crazy slogans of fear; to do all this at the cost of tranquility and the risk of harm, as a service to a government that does not know it needs it . . . is to deserve far more of history than we can give our guest tonight.

Although circumstances drew Paton into political activity, it would be improper to regard his famous first novel as a political document. While a primary

concern of art is a formal beauty that may reflect Justice; a primary concern of politics is the pursuit of power, and the literature that serves it is propaganda, not art. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is not propaganda. It seeks no solace in utopian political schemes of left or right; but it does reveal a concern for nurturing a capacity for justice in individuals. Zealous revolutionaries would scorn the personal actions taken by its characters to restore the village church and the land; but Paton might respond by recalling the inscription on a tablet in an old Yorkshire church that he first heard from Jan Hofmeyr: "In the year 1652, when through England all things sacred were either profaned or neglected, this church was built by Sir Robert Shirley, Bart., whose special praise it is to have done the best of things in the worst of times and to have hoped them in the most calamitous."

That is also the special praise of the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, the aged Anglican pastor who is the novel's main character. Warned in an earlier moment of desolation that, as a Christian, despair is forbidden him, the old priest, waiting on the mountaintop for the sunrise that will signal his son's execution for murder, opens the food package given him by his wife:

He looked out of his clouded eyes at the faint steady lightening in the east. But he calmed himself, and took out the heavy maize cakes and the tea, and put them upon a stone. And he gave thanks, and he broke the cakes and ate them, and drank of the tea. Then he gave himself over to deep and earnest prayer . . .

Commenting, in 1982, on the passage from which the book takes its title: "Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply." Paton has said: "I am sometimes astonished that these words were written in 1946 and that it took many of the white people of South Africa thirty years to acknowledge their truth, when black schoolchildren started rioting in the great black city of Soweto on June 16, 1976, on the day after which, of all the hundred thousand days of our written history, nothing would be the same again."

In the present calamitous times in South Africa Paton, at eighty-five, continues to hope that man's capacity for good will prevail. In the course of his Hoernle Memorial Lecture, "Federation or Desolation," delivered before the South African Institute of Race Relations in 1985, he had this to say:

In such times as these it is easy to lose hope. Nadezhda Mandelstam, whose husband, the poet Osip Mandelstam, died in 1938 in a "transit camp" at Vladivostok, wrote a book about their life of unspeakable suffering under Stalin. This book she called *Hope Against Hope*. After his death she wrote a second book, and wished it to be called in English *Hope Abandoned*. In South Africa we are still writing the first book. We trust that we shall never have to write the second.



A Story by  
LESTER GOLDBERG

## Thirteen Astor Place

Miller looked around at the union Executive Board members seated at the table. Guido was telling a story about guerilla fighters in the hills of the Philippines.

He drained his coffee, cold and bitter, and stretched his legs to ease the cramps. How long had they been sitting here? Jesus! Guido had switched gears and was going on about the membership drive. How long, he wondered while he glanced at Lily Sametz who was seated two chairs down from him, smoking a cigarette and puffing out clouds of smoke. Fred Cohen from the Red Hook project nodded chin on chest and then snapped himself awake.

Lily's hand shot up. "I move we send a telegram to President Truman that the Housing Local of the United Public Workers Union, C. I. O. urges him to tell the Philippine government to stop killing the Hukbalahaps and to meet with the Huks representatives."

Another voice, "I second that motion."

"Passed unanimously," the Chairman said. "Meeting adjourned."

Miller, elbows resting on the table, leaned across. "Where are all these Huks, Guido?"

"They're all in hiding, paisan," Guido said. "Come on, I'll buy you coffee."

Just out of the Seabees, he was grateful that Guido had gotten him into maintenance. Not much to be proud of, working at Jamaica Bay Houses in the swamplands of Canarsie but as Guido had pointed out, your drafting is rusty, and the N.Y. City Housing Authority is good for a steady paycheck.

A stiff March wind blew newspapers around darkened Astor Place and heads down, they walked past Wanamakers to Stewarts Cafeteria.

Guido picked up a tray, filled two coffee mugs, grabbed two crullers and Miller followed him to a corner table.

"Can't you lay off the Huks and resolutions like Jim Crow Must Go?" Miller said. "The average union member is bored by that stuff."

"The Negroes aren't bored."

"Sure they are. Talk dollars and cents. Horse sense. The men know we're underpaid; porters start at \$1260 a year. And the new maintenance guys like me get a lousy thirty bucks a week."

"It's starvation pay and that's why we need the union. Now will you let me tell you a little about the Hukbalahaps?"

"Give me a break, Guido. These crullers are stale. What can the Housing Chapter do about Huks?"

Guido got up and changed seats. Miller knew he was in for a long lecture. Guido wanted his good left ear next to Miller. The right one had gotten him a 20 percent army disability and a small monthly check. He looked like a member of the French Resistance, Miller thought, with his black beret and that limp.

"All right, Miller. I'll concede maybe I was long winded. But it doesn't hurt to educate the workers." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and held it out. "Have one."

"Camels. They're lung stabbers. I've got matches." He lit up. "How many people on the Board are Party?"

"You're a complaining type guy, Miller. Don't like the crullers I buy and my Camels are too strong."

"I bitch. I always have, always will. I'm riding the Moscow subway on my way to the Kremlin. I hang on to the strap, no seats, and read my Pravda. Christ, I say aloud. What kind of a bullshit paper is this? This paper says Harry Truman never sleeps with his wife Bess. Didn't Harry say they still sleep in the double bed they brought from Missouri? I'm overheard by your comrades, Guido, and they haul my ass off to Siberia."

"When are you joining the Party, Miller?"

"How many on the Board? Mike? Fred? Sy? Janet? Lily, I know is yours. You're awful quiet, Guido."

"You should be with us Miller. Your father was Union and working class. I remember you told me when he talked about his union, he always said the GREAT Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Always used the word GREAT."

A white-aproned man started shutting off the lights. He shook a sleeping man at the next table.

They sat on in semi-darkness.

"Can't you see, it's us—the Party that works hardest in the Union," Guido said.

"Lily sold me a six month's sub to the *Worker*. I'd never join the Party now. It's a dumb paper. The USA is always wrong and Russia is always right."

"Let's go," Guido said.

As they stood up, Guido tapped another cigarette from his pack and offered it to Miller. At the doorway, he stopped and lit up. "Want to shoot some pool, Guido?"

"I have to see Lily tonight."

"Why? Just because she visited Moscow?"

"Lily's a fine woman."

"A fine piece of ass, you mean."

"Cut it out, Miller."

"She's old. You're crowding thirty and Lily's at least..."

"I know how old I am. So just shut up!"

Outside, he rested his hand lightly on Guido's shoulder. "Power to the Huk-balahaps!"

"Up yours," Guido said and walked off.

Miller started for the subway. He heard running feet and wheeled around. Guido came close to him, breathed in his face. "I forgot, Miller. Come to my house for dinner tomorrow night. See you at work." He turned and hurried away.

Miller jumped at the chance for a home cooked meal. He had rented a room in Bay Ridge; shared a hall bathroom; had a two-burner gas range and no sink. To make morning coffee, he had to wait for someone to leave the bathroom.

Guido's mother piled Miller's plate high with meatballs and spaghetti and Guido's father kept filling his glass with chianti. "You hardly ate anything," Mrs. Coltrera said. "My fourteen-year-old Anthony eats more spaghetti than you. And you're a big man."

Dizzy and full, Miller went into the living room where Guido pushed him into the best chair.

Mr. Coltrera took a record from a walnut cabinet, handling it lovingly, blew on both sides and placed it on the phonograph. "Listen to Tito Ruffo," he said, "better than Caruso."

The voices crackled, then poured out of the machine like some smooth amber liquid. Miller looked at father and son, sitting side by side on the sofa. They were both crying, freely and unashamedly; the squarely built, strong small father and his six footer son. He envied them.

After black coffee in little cups and cream pastries, Mr. Coltrera poured anisette into small glasses for all of them. When he returned to the sofa, he raised his glass, "To the best president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, this country ever had . . . rest in peace . . . drink up boys."

"Pop, how about another record."

"Not after Ruffo. So . . . friend of my son," and he turned toward Miller, "you read the same paper and belong to the same union as my son?"

Miller nodded.

Mr. Coltrera bounded over to refill Miller's glass. He slipped and Miller reached up and grabbed his wrist, steadying him. Mr. Coltrera filled Miller's glass, then Guido's and his own. He twirled the glass in his fingers. "I filled him full of crazy ideas."

"No, Pop. It was Uncle Dominick who was always talking union when he lived at home."

"I mean other ideas. About the Italian Socialists—no place for them here in this country."

"You talked good, Pop. A great talker. I remember."

"Why can't you help me like you used to?"

"Pop, you haven't moved your truck out of the garage in a month. I'll be right back."

In a few minutes, Guido returned from a back room carrying a brown jacket over one arm. "I'm tired of this brown tweed, Miller. Why don't you try it on? We're about the same size."

"Sure. But try on my gray. Maybe we can make an exchange."

They stood looking at one another. Guido's jacket was a bit short in the sleeves for him; his jacket was tight across the chest on Guido.

Mr. Coltrera stood up. "When two poor men do business, no one gets rich." Then he grasped each of them around the shoulders and he started to cry again.

When Miller, in Guido's jacket, shook the old man's hand at the doorstep, Mr. Coltrera grabbed him, kissed him on both cheeks while he embraced his body in an iron hug.

On Friday, as Miller walked toward the subway, he realized he'd have to shift for himself this weekend. Guido had said nothing about handball on Saturday. They'd sometimes take the court and stave off all challenges, even

from younger men; win four or five doubles games. No union meeting until Tuesday.

It rained on and off all day Saturday.

Belinda knocked on his door with her bible and Jehovah's Witnesses pamphlets on Sunday morning. The church bells were ringing again for the third round of services.

"Belinda," he looked down on her dirty blonde head while she looked up, grinning her shit-eating grin, "take your God and your Bible and don't come back." She didn't blink. Just backed away in her brown and white saddle shoes, and softly went down the stairs. He's asked her in once, even made coffee. She stayed with her Bible prophecies and redemption and Armageddon and he'd asked her what had her God done lately? He ticked off a list of grievances. Others' grievances. The dead in the war. The Jews in the gas chambers. His own grievances. *I don't even know your real name. Why did I talk so rotten to you, you little, sweet ugly runt. What did your father call you?*

When his father clouted him across the face because he'd forgotten something from the store, he packed a few things in a paper bag and left the chicken farm in Stelton. He'd kicked the rooster in the front yard and the rooster pecked back. He walked down the dusty road to the crossroads. To the right was the school, ahead the grocery store. Where do you go at seven years of age? He stayed at the crossroads for a long time, then returned home. His father looked up from his paper when he entered the house. I'll give you one more chance, he told his father.

On Monday, Guido was awaiting him at the timeclock. "We've been talking about you. We'd like you to become Director of Organization for the chapter. Mike's resigned. He's expecting a promotion to management. Don't answer now. Let's talk about it lunch time."

He changed to his NYCHA uniform, took his tool box and picked up six work orders from his bin. He loaded the box and some spare parts into a supermarket shopping cart. A pregnant wife let him in at the first quonset hut and he replaced the water logged float ball in the flush tank. Then a couple of quick washer jobs. And now the street came alive with veterans' wives, pregnant or pushing baby carriages or holding toddlers by the hand—all on the way to the Supermarket or the laundromat. A kerosene truck honked and the women scattered like ducks followed by baby ducks. The truck stopped at the next quonset and began filling the 55 gallon drum on its cradle beside the hut with kerosene.

Guido worked the East Wing of Jamaica Bay Houses so they never saw one another until lunch time. He looked at his watch and decided on one more stop before lunch. This quonset hut said no man. No plantings around the hut. Papers and old furniture piled out front. Clothes lines broken.

He knocked three times then pushed the door open, shouting "Maintenance." This wife hadn't dressed yet and had a great pair of knockers under a soiled blue housecoat. She offered coffee while Miller was squatting in front of the kerosene space heater and adjusting the flow valve. The wife flesh on this job made him dizzy. "I'll take a raincheck on that coffee," he said.

"I'll call for you again," she said. "What's your name?"

"You can't ask for me. They'll only take calls for work. I'm called Miller."

"So I'll have work. Look around. There's lots of work to be done. I don't know where to start."

He paused at the door. "I'll take a rain—"

"You said that already."

"Next time then. Take care of yourself." If he'd believe some of the other maintenance men, they worked one hour and spent seven fucking. One guy claimed he fucked a housewife and then got her to sign the work ticket WORK SATISFACTORILY COMPLETED.

In the washroom, he scrubbed his hands with gritty soap powder, couldn't seem to get the dirt out from around his nails. He heard a heel clicking next to him and there was Cecil De Lande, the Jamaican shop steward, standing at mock attention. "You bout done making yourself beautiful, Miller, better come by me now. Super Cullen fire Eddie Brown and we got a grievance meeting at the Super's office at 11:50 sharp."

"Wait for Guido?"

"Nah. Super said he don't want no mob, just one or two men and Eddie."

In front of a wooden prefab, the Super's office, Eddie waited next to the steps, tool box in hand.

"Just put that box down, Eddie," Cecil said. "Brother Miller, he's here to help you. Now straighten your shoulders and walk in like a man."

Cecil mounted the steps first, Eddie followed, grasping his tool box.

"Let me carry your box, Eddie," Miller said. "Don't want the Super to think you're giving up." He took the box from Eddie and rested it on the top landing, out of the way.

Cullen wore his usual blue work shirt and black knit tie, topped by an old gray suit jacket. His pants never matched. "Sit down," and he motioned to three chairs lined up before his desk. A table nearby was cluttered with blueprints.

Cullen sat one leg crossed over the other and tapping with the rubber end of a pencil on his desk.

"You can't fire Eddie just like that, Mr. Cullen," Cecil said. "He entitled to a hearing."

"I'm giving him a hearing. Right now. Do you know what he did?" Cullen broke the pencil between his fingers, picked up a stilson wrench and began playing with the knurled knob. Eddie stared at the jaws as they grew larger and then smaller and larger again.

"He told me, Eddie did," Cecil said, "he had a little trouble fixing a shower body. Any man can have trouble with that old World War II junk."

Cullen shifted his chair toward Miller, addressing him only. "That clown," a finger stabbed at Eddie, "he tied a string to a shower head and the other end to the shower drain. The woman called up, asked what kind of repair is that. Now will you tell me what in the hell kind of repair is that? He tapped one, two, three taps with his wrench. **HE'S FIRED!**"

Cecil said, "Now looky here, Mr. Cullen, you just got to give Eddie another chance."

Looking at Miller and pointing to Eddie Brown, Cullen said, "I just fired him again. That's the third time."

Miller turned to Cecil. "What did you have in mind, Cecil?"

"Well I think we should all calm down and talk it over," Cecil said drawing his words out, "and hear from Mr. Eddie Brown here. He grievin."

"I just couldn't fix it. Had no part. So I figures the drip. . . it run down the cord into the drain and not bother the lady so. . ."

Cullen bared his teeth. A smile?

"He's got three kids, Mr. Cullen," Miller said. "A clean record, always on time and everyone likes him."

"He don't do the work. Can't do it."

"How about some training for fellas like Eddie Brown?" Cecil said.

"What do you think, you Negroes," Cullen said, "that I'm running a kindergarten."

"That's not nice, Cullen," Miller said. "But we know you didn't mean it. How about finding Mr. Brown another job? There's outside work."

Cullen pursed his lips as if he was thinking deeply. "I'll take him back as a porter. At porter's wages."

"Give us a minute. Mr. Cullen," Miller said. "We'll go outside and talk it over."

They filed out, onto the porch deck. "I'll take the job," Eddie said.

"You tell him, Miller," Cecil said. "Eddie take it. I go stand Eddie a beer. You too, come to our place."

"Right, Cecil, right," Miller said. "Don't give Cullen a chance to back out. He opened the office door. "He'll take the porter job, Mr. Cullen. He asked me to thank you."

"Where'd they run off to?"

"They went to lunch, figured it was all settled. Thanks again."

"Hey Miller, come back inside, all the way in and sit down for a minute."

He sat and waited.

"I been meaning to ask you. You're good with the men. And you had a good idea two weeks ago—using the old hot water tanks to bulwark the beach where the sand is eroding. How about becoming Assistant Superintendent. I've got two in the East Wing, can use one more here."

Miller hesitated deliberately. "No thanks, Mr. Cullen. I'm not ready." He got up and turned to go. He heard, "I won't ask you again."

He hurried to the porters' locker room. A pot simmered on the gas range. Several Negro men sat around a table spooning beans from their plates and wiping the plates out with Silvercup bread. Cecil and Eddie, heads together, were sipping Ruppert's from the bottle necks. "Want some beans, a little meat in it too, Miller," Cecil said.

"No thanks, Cecil."

Cecil pushed a bottle of beer toward Miller, then he got up, took a glass from a shelf and washed it at the sink. He set the glass near the beer.

Miller poured and drank a few swigs. "Cecil, Guido asked me to take a job with the union, directing organization. Like getting more men to join the union. What do you think?"

"What do they pay?"

"No pay."

"You take it, Miller."

"I'll take it, if you join the Executive Board."

"I go to stewards' meetings once a month."

"Just one more meeting, on Tuesday night, the third Tuesday."

"I'll do it, Miller. Course I'm maintenance like you and Guido. We need a porter."

"The others are all office workers," he said. "We'll find a porter."

Guido walked in. "Where've you been? I looked all over for you. Have any lunch?"

"No time. I'll tell you later. I'll take that job."

"That's great," Guido said. "Let's shake on it." He stuck out his hand.

Miller grabbed and held it. "But the first thing we do, you and I—no more lunch at the luncheonette or the spaghetti joint. From now on, we eat in the porter's room with the men."

By Friday, they'd signed up six new members. Miller asked Guido, Cecil and Eddie to meet him at the luncheonette on Rockaway Avenue for a private meeting.

The waitress poured coffee and the men ordered sandwiches.

"We've got to get more members," Miller said, "and if the men won't come down to Astor Place then the only way is to get over to the projects and sign them up."

"Miller's one hundred percent right," Guido said. "Get more members, build our union so the City has to listen to us. You know we've got guys working steady for the last ten years, guys with kids—they still need help from welfare to pay the bills."

"We can use my car," Cecil said. "It's old like me but it still goes. You stand with us, Eddie?"

"I'm with you."

"We can use my car too," Guido said.

The waitress brought four sandwiches. Eddie reached for his ham sandwich, saw no one else eating and pulled his hand back. "Let's start with a few projects—the big ones," Miller said. "Cecil and I can hit Red Hook, Linden Houses on our lunch hour. Guido, you and Eddie hit Williamsburgh and Fort Greene."

"We can get Marcy too, that's big and Kingsboro," Guido said.

"Not Kingsboro," Cecil said, "that's no place for white bread. Eddie got a porter cousin there. Leave it to us."

"How about the other boroughs," Guido said.

"We're OK in Queens," Miller said. "I spoke to Pat Coleman. He's got forty members at Queensbridge and four men who'll hit all the Queens jobs. How about Manhattan?"

"We're strong in the offices but weak stewards in maintenance in some places," Guido said. "Try Lily at Wald Houses. She'll help out."

"So why don't you call her," Cecil said.

They wolfed their food. Drank more coffee.

"I'm taking a week off, maybe two," Guido said. "I can cover more ground than just on lunch hours or nights."

"I can't afford it," Miller said.

"Okay, okay, no sweat," Guido said. He picked up the four lunch checks. Miller reached into his back pocket for his wallet. Cecil pulled out two crumpled bills but Guido waved them aside.

The Executive Board called for a lunch time picket line outside the Housing Authority's headquarters building on Park Row. Three hundred workers showed up. They carried signs and chanted, "WAGE INCREASE NOW and WAGE INCREASES/ NOT WELFARE" over and over. Lily and two others between these chants, shouted, "JIM CROW MUST GO." Guido exulted, "The Mayor can hear us at City Hall." The *New York Times* carried a squib on the back page, "Housing Authority workers preparing to strike."

At a hastily convened Exec. Board meeting, the talk was all strike—not should we go out, but when do we pull. Cecil wanted to strike in a week, while the men were hot. Guido had driven Pat Coleman, the old watchman steward from Queensbridge to the meeting. A slow careful man, Pat, he said, "The men are ready. Let's call them together next week and set the date for the week after." Miller reported membership was up to 600 men and women, but 250 were new members gathered in during the last month. He knew the Authority had 2500 workers but there was no holding back now.

Miller awakened Monday night before the strike vote and couldn't get back to sleep. He remembered his school playground and always he went odds and evens against another boy to choose up sides. A clumsy fat boy hung around the edges of the boys waiting to be chosen. He always chose this boy for his team, so he wouldn't have to be chosen last. Why? It was hard to win a game with him around and he liked to win. Then he tried reciting the names of all the men he'd met, project by project, until toward morning, he finally dozed off.

At work the next day, his eyes burned and his head ached. He nicked his hand with a screwdriver while removing a stubborn washer. Several men asked him, "When do we strike?"

"Come down to the meeting tonight," he answered.

Guido collared him outside the meeting room at 13 Astor Place. "I'd like to handle the blue collar guys tonight."

"Why you and not me?"

"Fred said he could use an assist with the office workers. He says you never talk to him."

"If you think it's best. But don't forget to sign up anyone who isn't a union member and collect \$1.50 for their first month's dues."

"Don't worry about it. You look a little tired."

Miller sat impatiently through Fred's meeting, one ear cocked to the blue collar meeting next door. Lots of questions were thrown at Fred, but he fielded them and everyone promised full support.

Miller heard loud voices in the hallway; he couldn't sit still any longer and ducked out of the meeting.

Guido, face flushed, was talking to a knot of six men in the hall.

Miller pushed his way through. "Did you get the non-union guys signed up?" he asked Guido.

"No. I just didn't have the time," and Guido turned away to speak to Claude.

"Guido! Don't turn your back on me. You're as useless as the hair on a witch's tits. How about those membership cards?"

"What the fuck is eating you, Miller? You think you give all the orders and we peasants carry them out."

"You asshole! What are you! A priest in darkest Africa trying to be nice to the natives. The dues! You're selling free trade unionism. There's no free lunch. Make them pay their way. It's good for them!"

Claude got between them. "Have your fight in private. This don't look good."

Miller spun around and headed for the staircase. Then he turned back and went into the washroom where he washed his face in cold water. No towels left so he took out his handkerchief and dried his face and hands. He went out and wandered in the hallway. The room where the blue collar workers had met was empty. He went in and sat on a chair in the back. He picked up a discarded *New York Daily News*, tried to read. The print swam before his eyes.

Guido wandered in, hands in his pockets and walked to the front of the room. Back to Miller, he studied the large sign SOLIDARITY FOREVER. He circled around and sat down near Miller. Miller glanced at him and looked away.

Guido started to speak softly. "My father wants to help us. He said we should get in touch with Uncle Dominick because Jack Dempsey went to Dominick's wife's funeral."

"How will that help? Does Dominick have any political connections?"

"I almost bust out laughing in my old man's face."

"So what's funny. Tell me."

"Uncle Dominick's a charter member of the Grave Diggers Union of America. He's retired."

Miller laughed, a tentative laugh. Guido leaned over and clapped him on the shoulder. They laughed and laughed and couldn't stop until they were gasping for breath.

Strike Day One and Strike Day Two were uneventful. Miller hit all the jobs in Brooklyn each day and the picket lines were strong and loud.

Friday night, Miller called the Strike Committee together at headquarters. The Authority had refused to negotiate while the men were on strike.

He sat at the table surrounded by six men. "Here's a list of fifty names. Fifty key men. They have to be visited this weekend, Saturday or Sunday."

"You're not going to poll them, I hope?" Guido said. "The strike's got to go on."

"No, of course not. Just buck them up with a visit. Touch base, encourage them. We get together Sunday night right here and compare notes."

Miller took out six slips of paper and gave each man a slip. "Eight names per man. Get someone to help you and split up the list if you have to."

"I've got some guys who promised to help," Guido said. "Office workers, but solid. I'll give you their phone numbers. "One more thing," he said. What . . . what else? His mind went blank. What was he doing here?

The others waited respectfully.

"Oh yeah, I remember," he said with relief. "I starred some names. Those guys haven't signed union cards, get them to sign even if they can't pay their dues."

Looking at his list, Guido said, "You've got two names on Staten Island."

"So swim across the harbor," Miller said.

"I'll get to them," Guido said.

Wednesday, Strike Day Five, and Miller couldn't get into the hall bathroom. Someone sick in there and he heard the sounds of vomiting. So he jumped into his clothes, ran down the stairs two at a time and slid behind the wheel of his borrowed Plymouth. Son-of-a-bitch! It wouldn't start.

Out of the car and he hurried to the luncheonette on Fort Hamilton Parkway and phoned Guido.

"I'll pick you up," Guido said. Manhattan's ship-shape, no problems there. I've got a couple of good men covering. Eddie's going up to Harlem to see a head porter who seems to be caving in."

"How do I get around Brooklyn today?"

"I can be spared from Manhattan. Stay put and I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

Nursing his paper cup of coffee, Miller waiting in the doorway. April had turned unexpectedly cold, after a few mild days.

Guido double-parked, threw the door open and waved at him.

He got in, shook Guido's hand. Guido grabbed him around the neck and hugged him.

They drove to Ulmer Park, a small place, and the picket line was moving. Miller signaled thumbs up and they barreled off. Down to Linden Houses where they both jumped out. The shop steward wasn't on the line. One man complained that the Super had taken away their 55 gallon drum and they couldn't make a fire to stay warm.

"Here's a couple of bucks," Guido said, "buy the guys some coffee."

Back in the car and Miller worried aloud, "Jesus, complaining about the cold—with the strike in its fifth day."

They headed for Jamaica Bay. Miller refused a cigarette. Guido lit up, as Miller held the wheel.

"What the hell am I doing here?" Miller said. "Working my ass off. Will my life change if I get another \$240 a year?"

"I can't answer that one. But I was right when I picked you to direct organization. You're doing one hell of a good job."

"So stop at the next gas station, will you? I didn't get a chance to pee this morning."

Guido turned off the Belt Parkway before the Jamaica Bay exit and rolled into a Texaco station. "I'll phone headquarters, see what's going on."

Miller got back first and waited in the car. Guido bolted out the gas station entrance, hand raised in the air, shouting and running. He got into the driver's seat, turned to Miller. "We won! They've settled. Jack Fliegel said we're all to come to Astor Place. They've started making calls to the jobs to get the men to come in."

Guido headed up Flatbush Avenue toward the Manhattan Bridge. Just before the Brooklyn Paramount traffic got heavy and finally slowed to a crawl as bands of high school kids blocked the street. Some danced the Lindy Hop or the Big Apple; on they came, waves of them, to hear Frank Sinatra, live on stage.

"We won, Guido. It's true."

"How do you feel?"

"Like I ran a long race and finally reached the finish line. Up and downhill all the way. What do I do now?"

"There's lots to be done. Consolidate our gains. Sign up more members. Start a training class for porters to upgrade them to maintenance men. Lots of things."

"Do you believe in Santa Claus, Guido?"

"I was eight or so and I didn't believe in Santa then, but just in case I hung one of those long wool stockings on the end of my bed."

"I'll bet your father stuffed it."

The car crept along and stopped again. Then the traffic jam broke and they sailed onto the Manhattan Bridge.

Guido found a parking space on East 10th Street. A sign in the lobby of 13 Astor Place: HOUSING CHAPTER, GO TO LOCAL 65 auditorium on the second floor.

They raced up the stairs and joined the crowd of green uniformed NYCHA men going to the meeting room. Men kept pouring into the room in work clothes; a few office workers in suits. The women stood out like garden flowers among the darkly dressed men.

Union president Jack Fliegel raised both hands for silence. A hush came over the room. "WE WON!"

Men jumped up, shook hands, embraced one another, shouting, stamping their feet. The men kissed the few women there like it was V/E day in Paris.

The uproar continued for five minutes, then Jack raised one palm and the audience quieted down. "We beat the Mayor and his cronies, the fatcat politicians. We fought the good fight against a tough adversary—the City of New York. You did it! They caved in. Not because they love you—" a drawnout noooooo from the crowd, "but because they knew they were beaten by the fighting workers, united, in their trade union—the Housing Chapter of Local 111 of the United Public Workers."

A shout from the audience. "When do we get our raise?"

"I can't say, details are still to be worked out," Jack said. "Now I want to introduce some of the people who contributed by their efforts and sacrifice to this great victory for our Union and the Trade Union movement. You all deserve to be up here on the platform and if I leave anyone out, why I know you'll forgive me. You all know the man beside me, your Chapter Chairman, Handsome Jerry. . ." The rest of his words were drowned out by a mighty shout.

Jack called, "Cecil De Lande, come on up here, Cecil."

From the standees in back, Cecil appeared and walked toward the platform like a minister at a christening.

"Ed Brown."

Ed danced up the aisle, two hands clasped high. He stopped at the steps and snapped two left jabs, followed by a right cross. More shouting, foot stamping, cries of "Atta boy, Cecil. You showed 'em Eddie."

"Lillian Sametz."

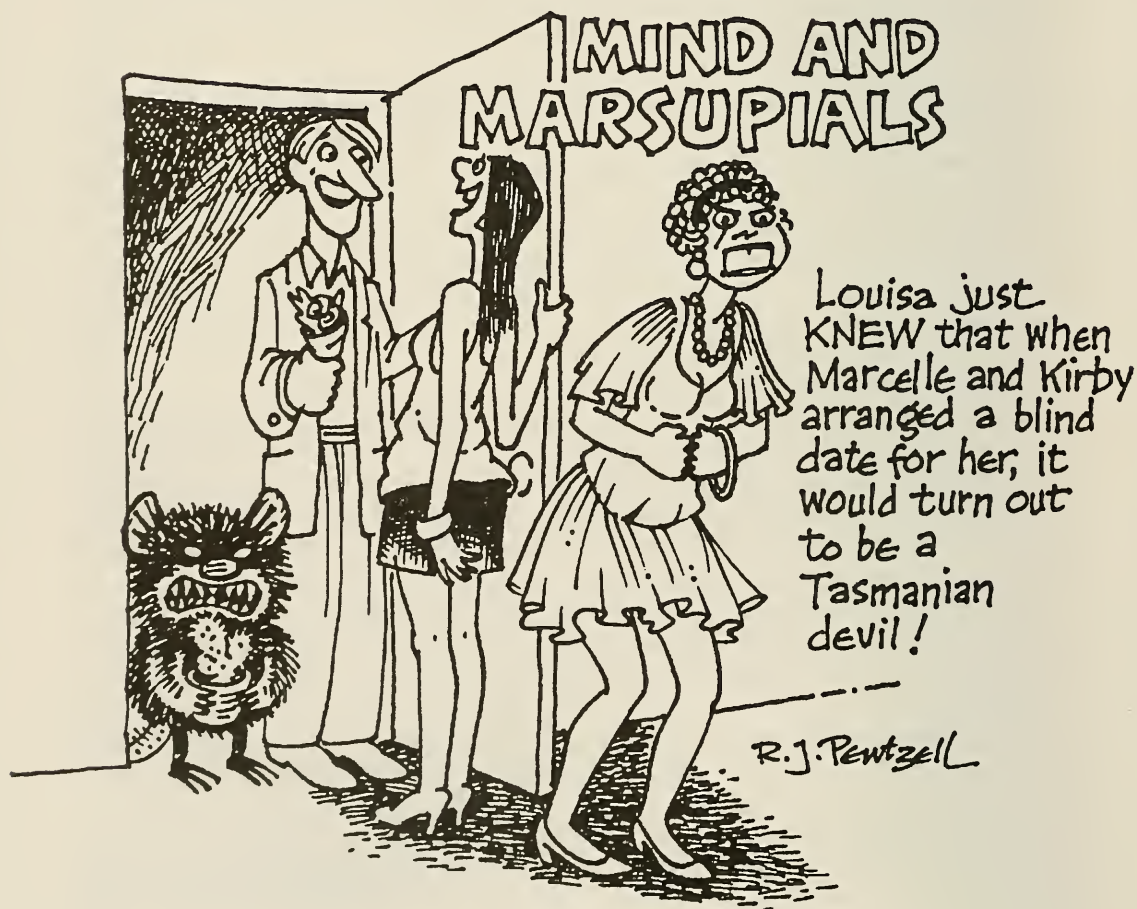
How proudly she walked up front, all of her shimmering; her high heels clip-clopping. Cecil came off the platform and crooked his elbow and she linked one arm in his as he helped her up the steps.

Miller turned to Guido. "I wonder where you'll be twenty years from now." Guido shrugged and hearing his name, he edged his way between the men's knees and chair backs to the aisle.

"Miller."

Trapped! As his name was called, he started slowly toward the front. He tripped over an outstretched foot. A friendly hand pushed him along. A man clapped him on the back. A smattering of applause which grew and he knew. . . he knew. . . he was caught, trapped by Claude and Lily and the others; trapped by Guido and Guido's father. . . and he would have to stay on and on. . . and see it through.

OOOO



J. D. McCLATCHY

## An Old Song Ended

*All earthly pomp or beauty to express  
Is but to carve in snow, on waves to write.  
Celestial things, though men conceive them less,  
Yet fullest are they in themselves of light;  
Such beams they yield as know no means to die,  
Such heat they cast as lifts the spirit high.*

Your tire tracks have spoiled the snow outside,  
And inside, where there's something wrong, the stem's  
Corrupt but slick subtext is magnified  
In the vase beneath a Star of Bethlehem.  
If nature disappoints, as it appears,  
Whom do we trust when each the other fears?

Where once the stars had crossed themselves to light  
A way for kings, or show as angels to the boy  
Minding his flock, who stares to see the night  
All changed into a story quick with joy,  
Now is nothing but fire, nothing but air.  
The only pattern here's the window, this chair.

It's difficult to look for long at snow,  
When most of heaven's fallen to earth out there.  
A scalding brilliance poured over the cold.  
The trees, the road, your car—lost in the glare.  
To steep myself in light, then close my eyes. . . .  
These winter days are darkness in disguise.

But here you come, bursting in the door,  
Sunlight and snowlight streaming in behind.  
Is blindness, then, the gift you give before  
The rest?—forgiveness, say, to lose and find  
In what's at hand, the common day which seems  
At last the light that yields such heat, such beams.

OOOO

A Story by  
SEAMUS O'HALLURAIN

## Eccentrics All

I had only two encounters with Padre Jose Larumbe in my life, but each is etched graphically on my mind.

The first time was when I was walking down a long empty corridor in a Latin American monastery that went back to the time of the conquistadores. The silence was broken only by the ancient boards complaining beneath my feet. From an ascetic white-washed wall a gaunt St. John of the Cross looked heavenwards with large liquid eyes from a fading and fraying oil-painting. On his desk was a grinning skull.

Not far from this picture there was a similar one of John's fellow reformer, Teresa of Avila. With no-nonsense look and raised forefinger she seemed to be admonishing her sisters to pull up their socks; or rather to dispense with socks and shoes altogether and resort to sandals. Now this penchant for airy sandals which Teresa and John shared was one thing in the torrid Spanish summers, yet quite another in the nippy Spanish winters. And it certainly was not to be emulated in the Andes where raw air can gnaw wild-eyed and mercilessly at unprotected toes.

As I pondered the "eccentricities" of John and Teresa, a door burst open. Out came an elderly priest, as gaunt as John and as bald as his pet skull.

"What's your name?" he asked emphatically.

I told him.

"You're a gringo. Are you a priest?"

"Yes."

"Secular or regular?"

"A Salesian."

"Ah, St. John Bosco! Great man . . . Where do you come from?"

"Ireland."

"North or South?"

"South."

"Is that the part the English are occupying?"

"No."

"Ah, so you're from *Irlanda la catolica* . . . O'Connell, San Patricio, De Valera, Bernardo O'Higgins, Mateo Talbot, Blessed Oliver Cromwell . . ."

"Plunkett," I interposed.

"Wonderful nation *Irlanda* . . . I've read a lot about it. De Valera is a Spanish name, you know . . . Spanish father . . . And I wish our Indians would imitate the sobriety of your Mateo Talbot. But their bodies bestrew the gutters every weekend . . . Wait a minute."

He disappeared into his room, abandoning me like a spare wheel in the corridor.

"Down with the gringos!" he croaked from inside.

"Well that's a bit much," I thought indignantly. "This man isn't exactly a diplomat, and me a gringo." I was about to march off in a huff.

"Shut up you stupid bird!"

So that was the explanation.

"Say Otero Romero . . . Otero Romero . . ."

"Oh no!" I groaned, "not another Otero Romero fanatic."

Otero Romero was President of Ohiggania in the 1890's and governed the place like a blackthorn-wielding parish priest. He would even sally forth at night and chase courting couples from the walls of the Presidential Palace. These promptly escaped to the shadows of the neighbouring cathedral. His memory was revered by priests of a certain age, but the younger ones thought "a silly old geyser".

"Otero Romero," muttered the bird as though under protest.

"That's better."

The priest re-appeared with a pile of books. "Take these. Spread the word. It's the life of Otero Romero. The whole world should know about this man. In fact he's more appreciated in some places abroad than here at home. His name is a household word in France. By the way, you're from . . . ?"

"Ireland."

"Ah, *Irlanda la catolica!* De Valera, San Patricio, Bernardo O'Higgins, O'Connell, Mateo Talbot, Blessed Oliver Cromwell . . ."

"Plunkett."

"Send these to Ireland—airmail."

"But they're in Spanish, father."

"Then translate the book and do a signal service to humanity . . . I wrote it myself. Here's the name . . . Jose Larumbe."

"Jose Larumbe," I repeated. "It has a lilt to it."

The door of his room had slowly groaned open, and I noticed that his shelves were packed with spare copies of the work. I also saw the mynah-bird regarding me warily with cocked beady eye.

"Don't waste a minute. Go and spread the word."

"Gringo loco!" croaked the bird most inopportunistly and blew a raspberry."

*Dios mio*, what's come over that bird? Who could possibly have taught him to be so rude?" asked Jose lamely. "Anyway, you're Irish and Catholic . . . not really a gringo . . . The English and *yanquis* are the real gringos. Unfortunately most people don't make the distinction. They lump all English speakers together and call them gringos. But the Irish are different . . . a great people. Didn't De Valera do well to overcome the drink?"

"Yes, marvellously," I replied with resignation, as I gave up trying to unsnarl Padre Jose's Irish history.

"He could serve as a shining example for our Indians."

Then as suddenly as he had appeared, Jose disappeared into his room. "Say Otero Romero . . . Otero Romero . . ." he called from behind closed doors.

I stood at a loss with the bundle and raised my eyes to heaven. I looked to John of the Cross. His eyes were also raised to heaven.

"Listen John," I murmured, "if you and Tess were eccentrics, you're certainly in the right corridor." And I set out to find a suitable place in which to dump my pile of books, while thanking God that I hadn't met one Padre Lopez who also lived in that monastery and had written eight volumes of fact, fiction, and

pious hearsay about Otero Romero. And he said that there were still a few volumes to go "if God spares me". But, 'tis rumoured, God is merciful.

Walking between the colonnades that bordered the peaceful monastery garden, I met a silver-haired priest saying his office as palms waved and chortling doves bowed their adoration to one another by the softly-splashing fountain in the middle of the area. Looking momentarily at me and the books, he gave a harsh little laugh. "I see you ran into auld Larumbe," he muttered ironically. "You'll find a bin for garbage on the way out." He then went back to devotedly reading his office. "Used Paper" announced the bin rather more gently.

Next time I met Padre Jose Larumbe was in the Church of St. Cajetan, adjacent to his monastery, when I wandered in to say a few prayers. That church I loved because it was the people's church, a favourite haunt of Indians from the countryside. With downtrodden look they padded in on bare or sandalled feet, lit their flickering stars of hope and placed them before Jesus del Gran Poder. His feet were also bare and the shoulders oppressed beneath the cross. He was a brother in the struggle.

A mother knelt with her son, a young man in his twenties. He had the sturdy black hair peculiar to his race, yet the face and hands were unusually refined and the dark eyes shone brightly. There was only the remotest hint of the bronzed, craggy-faced Inca. What a transformation consumption can work. The concerned mother rubbed him all over with a blessed candle before lighting it at the shrine of Christ.

On the way out she would give him a drink of Cajetan's water under the benign purveyance of the saint.

In this church I always felt my soul distend and rest in the atmosphere of winking candles and sanctuary lamps that softly shed their blood on the dimmed air.

Outside a confessional a little knot of people had gathered, obviously awaiting a priest. I placed my face in my hands and my mind gradually drifted. As always I recalled the Friary Chapel in my hometown. I could hear the hob-nail boots resound on the dusty wooden floor. As a four-year-old I used to kneel beside granddad as Father Frost gave out the rosary. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is . . ." "Hooly Mary, Mother of God . . ." the response swelled before he could finish. Then came the litany. "Ark of the Covenant . . . Gate of Heaven . . . Morning Star . . ." To which the people replied encouragingly—and I joined them—"Pray Frost"; or so at least it sounded to my childish ears. I smiled at the recollection. No matter how many years one has been away, in the depths of one's being there is always the faintest chick cheep of an aching for home.

The sudden click of a confessional door aroused me from my reverie. I looked up. A priest was entering. None other than Padre Jose Larumbe. Since he didn't have the indiscreet mynah-bird perched on his shoulder, I thought I'd risk confession. Not that I find confession an easy chore or go to any old body, yet Jose had been pleasant enough (and certainly generous!) to me when last we met. True he was a trifle odd, but isn't the litany of the saints peppered with glorious eccentrics?

I took my position outside the confessional. Nobody was moving. It was as though all were waiting for someone to try the water. An old woman with translucent lantern-jawed face glanced at me fleetingly with dark wells of sanctity and then pulled a shawl over her frosty head.

Padre Jose murmured a blessing, then asked, "How long since your last confession?" A mite loud I felt, but since I wasn't as yet indicting myself, I let it pass.

"Two months. And bless me father for I have sinned. I am a priest and a religious."

"A priest and a religious and you haven't been to confession for two months . . . umph . . . Anyway, how many times?" he shouted.

Outside a woman, either decent or scrupulous, had a prolonged spasm of coughing and lengthily blew her nose.

"How many times what, father?"

"How many times did you sin?" Jose was nothing if not to the point—and he was still shouting.

*Dios mio*, I must do something about this," I agonized. "Father, you're embarrassing me," I whispered hoarsely.

"WELL WHY DO YOU SIN THEN IF YOU'RE EMBARRASSED?"

I peered through the grill. So this was where the word "grilling" had its origin?

"How many times?" loudly persisted my interrogator. And it was then that I saw him put something to his ear.

"Oh no," I squirmed, "an ear-trumpet . . . This is a nightmare . . . I'm caught in a time warp . . . last century . . . Maybe he found all those lives of Otero Romero at the bottom of the dustbin . . ."

Without another word I upped and fled. Nobody stirred to replace me. In flight I caught a man's bemused glance which seemed to suggest that I could read the signs of the heavens but not the signs of the times. Anyway, I took to my heels leaving Jose with his trumpet to his ear . . .

For all I know he may still be there. Indeed over the years I have often had visions of him frozen in that posture, awaiting the last trumpet when he will be summoned to the Valley of Jehoshaphat with Otero Romero (scattering courting couples on the way), San Patricio, De Valera, O'Connell, Bernardo O'Higgins, Mateo Talbot, and Blessed Oliver Cromwell—sorry—Plunkett.

On arriving home, I was relating my experience to a companion over a reviving cup of coffee.

"You know something? You're quite mad," he laughed.

I put down my cup with a minor clatter. Slightly stunned and with mouth ajar, I looked at him for a long moment, then said, "Tell me. Do you honestly think so?"



HUGH O'DONNELL

## Erosion at Spanish Point

Despite the impish spray,  
we do not laugh, but pick  
our solitary steps across  
the unmade beds of rock;  
where will we be, we say,  
in a hundred years  
on a similar day,  
as the black-backed gull  
hovers for a moment above  
the rotting teeth of a fence  
then fades out of sight;

in the growing mist I recall  
how a child succumbs  
to the trick and treat of tide:  
“why does the water not spill  
all over the place. . . ?”  
while we clamber up the hag-  
face of cliff schooled to  
a constant trickling of land.

OOOO

HUGH O'DONNELL

## Gardening in May

The heart-breaking stuff over,  
there is now a compatible air  
to encourage green; just now,  
a man driving a lawn-mower  
has disappeared behind some trees  
assuring us that everything  
is under control; it's a show  
of force, all this industry,  
a clear statement that we are  
alive and notice grass coming on  
strong, leaves stirring. . .  
but mainly it's the old year  
we inhabit where lives linger  
neither happy nor supremely sad;  
for seasons are like children  
craving our attention,  
showing off their poems  
and early steps; we indulge  
their promise for a time  
until the pressure builds  
and we rush out to murder daisies.

OOOO



## So They Say...

BILL LYON

### Sudden Thoughts and Second Thoughts

There is nothing wrong with sex on television. Providing you don't fall off.

If you want to do something that will live forever, sign a mortgage.

If it doesn't make sense, it's either economics or psychology.

History repeats itself. That's one of the things wrong with history and historians.

Frustration is when you have ulcers and still aren't successful.

You never really learn to swear until you learn to drive.

A hunch is an idea you're afraid is wrong.

How come they can make an aluminum can that lasts forever and a car that rusts in two years?

Lightning never strikes twice in the same place. Of course, it seldom needs to.

How is it possible to visit eight different countries on your vacation and come back with souvenirs that all say "Made in Hong Kong?"

A friend is someone who dislikes the same people you dislike.

Basic research is what you're doing when you're not exactly sure what it is that you're doing.

Credit cards are what make it possible to get along without the cash you would have if you didn't have credit cards.

Anyone who thinks marriage is a 50-50 proposition doesn't understand one of two things—marriage or percentages.

Virus: That's Latin for, "your guess is as good as mine."

Children and parents should never be in the same family.

It is true that most of us can't stand prosperity. Then again, most of us don't have to.

For every "10" there are 10 "1's".

A fool and his money are soon parted. The rest of us just wait until tax time.

Statistics can be used to support anything. Including statisticians.

Most of us can forget and forgive. We just want to make sure that the other person never forgets that we forgave.

Most of the things you liked to do as a kid are now being done by batteries.

Nothing lasts forever. With the possible exception of those public television pledge drives.

A friend in need is a pest.



## So They Say...

Socialism is when the state owns everything. Capitalism is when your wife does.

Just when you find the meaning of life, they change it.

How long a minute lasts depends on which side of the bathroom door you happen to be.

It's not what you eat between Christmas and New Year's but between New Year's and Christmas.

Flattery is all right as long as you don't inhale.

Heredity is what a man believes in until his son starts acting like an idiot

Television is often referred to as a medium because it rarely comes well done.

Television proves that people will look at anything rather than each other.

The best way to refold a map is in a ball.

If you want to visit those far away places with the strange-sounding names, just try to read that map you've tried to fold back up.

The father of the bride spends \$8,000 on the wedding and they have the nerve to say he gave the bride away.

Most cars have one thing that will last a lifetime—the payments.

Summer camps are places where 17-year-olds you wouldn't trust with your car are taking care of your kids.

Prosperity is when you leave your air-conditioned home and drive in your air-conditioned car to your air-conditioned physical fitness club to take a steam bath.

Thanks to air conditioning, it is no longer necessary to wait until January to catch cold.

If the label says "new" or "improved," it means they've raised the price.

The second day of a diet is easier than the first because by then you're off it.

A model driver is someone who just saw the guy ahead of him get a ticket.

If hospitals are places to get you well, why do they serve that food?

If you think nothing is impossible, you have never tried settling an account with a computer.

You think things really improve with age? Ever attend a class reunion?

All of us are in favor of progress. Unless it involves change.

The trouble with blessings in disguise is that they're so hard to recognize.

The only nice thing about being imperfect is all that joy it brings to others.

If at first you don't succeed, forget sky diving.

If at first you don't succeed, find out if the loser wins anything.



## So They Say. . .

If at first you don't succeed, you're running about average.

If at first you don't succeed, pretend you weren't really trying in the first place.

If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your thing.

If at first you do succeed, try to hide your astonishment.

If you happen to get something right once, your reward is that someone will ask you to do it again.



Jeffrey Simpson, columnist for *The Globe and Mail* of Toronto, has described the New Democratic Party of Canada as being top heavy with the "chattering classes," a term he defined as including "university professors, high school teachers, ministers of the cloth, journalists." Simpson noted that "the chattering classes run nothing, but comment on everything. Oversimplification comes with the territory."

—New York Times, November 8, 1987

The following words are part of the instructions for the Brimate Book Light. How to replace the battery: Use screw drive or equivalent tool to open the Bottom, lose the old battery then replace new battery in it.

And here are a few quotations from the past that bear another look.

Mistreatment of Jews in Germany may be considered virtually eliminated.

—Cordell Hull (*U.S. Secretary of State, quoted in Time, April 3, 1933*)

It's silly talking about how many years we will have to spend in the jungles of Viet Nam when we could pave the whole country and put parking stripes on it and still be home for Christmas.

—Ronald Reagan (*candidate for the Governorship of California, interviewed in the Fresno BEE, October 10, 1965*)

My dear fellow, I may perhaps be dead from the neck up, but rack my brains as I may, I can't see why a chap should need thirty pages to describe how he turns over in bed before going to sleep.

—Marc Humblot (*French editor, letter to Marcel Proust rejecting *Ala Recherche Du Temps Perdu* for publication, February 10, 1912*)

We can confidently say of American fiction that, while it may not be national, and may not be great, it will at least have the negative virtue of being clean.

—Bliss Perry (*Editor of the Atlantic Monthly, 1902*)



DAVID R. SLAVITT

## Circus Costumes

1

I never knew my grandfather, my father's  
father. A figment I had to invent him from  
thin air or, harder, correct from the misleading  
hints I'd got from the clinkers of love and rage  
still warm in my father's heart's furnace.  
Who approaches altars in the shrines  
that families are without dread? Had he  
lived, I might have seen him plain (grandchildren  
can) without that shimmer of heated air  
that rises so often between fathers and sons.

2

What do I know of my grandfather that I  
trust, that I did not learn at second hand  
from my father? A picture, now lost, that I think  
I remember; and my aunt's enlightenment  
of why they moved to Bridgeport, why their plan  
for a tailoring shop and gas station was not  
totally crazy: the circus wintered there,  
and my grandfather could make costumes for clowns,  
acrobats, and bareback riders, silks  
and satins, fancy suits with ruffs and spangles.

## 3

My father never mentioned this, preferred  
the story of the atelier in Paris  
where his father and uncle made the wedding dress  
for Alexandra, a hundred women sewing  
seed pearls on the train. Royalty! Class!  
Or anyway not that louche other. . . The low  
life, like alcohol or other minor  
vices, must not be made too much of. Let  
the children have their first sips in comfort,  
at home, or else it becomes a mystery, looms.

## 4

Or rather say there was too much love, a hugging  
that nearly killed them as they clutched one another.  
My father wasn't the eldest but the first  
who was born on this side and lived. Another  
brother came between Abe and him (Abe cannot  
even remember the name), and my father was cherished,  
spoiled rotten. With such delusions of grandeur  
how could he admit to his father's life  
and work frivolty, garishness, the glitz  
of circuses, and their brown animal smells?

## 5

And on their side? What they demanded of him  
I dare not even imagine, attainments, perfections,  
the fulfillment of dreams no flesh and blood child  
could ever manage. That he did as well as he did  
was a marvel, but it cost him. To be ignored  
I sometimes think is a great gift, as my aunt,  
a mere girl, was—who later could afford  
to take a job distributing skin-flicks  
in which the performers kept their hats on and wore  
(the studios must have been chilly) socks—costumes.

## 6

My father never spoke about this either,  
although his sister's irregular regular wages  
helped get him and his younger brother through school  
and kept a roof over their heads. My aunt,  
who thought it was funny, was right. And later she married  
my uncle who traveled for Jewish charities with  
those same curious films in the trunk of his car  
to get the sports into a giving mood.  
My grandfather, had he not been dead by then,  
might have enjoyed the joke. But not my father.

## 7

Whatever they wore here, however they spoke  
 or carried on, my grandfather would have thought them  
 outlandish, clowns he kept in stitches. A man  
 with his griefs—that baby, that homeland,  
 the world's pretense at making sense gone,  
 ripped like a basted seam, melted like shoddy  
 goods in a rainstorm. . . What did he care what they  
 thought (whoever *they* were)? A man with a load  
 of heavy stones cannot imagine men  
 who bear no such burdens, who float, *Luftmenschen*.

## 8

On the other hand, drum rolls and the hushed attention  
 to those diminutive figures way up there  
 in grandpa's flashy suits, bathing in light,  
 who dared thin air and leapt to their conclusions  
 on another trapeze. . . that was serious stuff,  
 death-defying! Would the clothing, discarded,  
 be soaked in blood or just sweat? Is there  
 a difference? My father didn't think so. Exams  
 at school were trials, as, later, his trials in courtrooms  
 were exams, high-wire acts in the family circus.

## 9

It is spring; the sap is rising; and the rubes  
 rise to their feet as we climb, rung by rung,  
 that awesome pole that holds the big top up  
 to the tiny platform. Down below, your father,  
 my son, stands watch as we whirl over his head  
 like gnats, like furies but tiny at that distance.  
 We would call down assurances of our loves,  
 but he can't hear us, fear for us, fears us,  
 as we let go, fly off, fly back, and hug,  
 holding on to each other, as if for dear life,

## 10

but nowhere near so desperate or serious. Later,  
 from our dressing room, while getting out of our costumes,  
 we hear the drums and applause in antiphonal salvos  
 but give our attention to hangers that stir in the closet  
 like wind chimes in a garden. As if in a seance,  
 it could be grandpa signaling his approval,  
 or merely a greeting. I have his name; we have  
 his blood; you have my grandfatherly love—tepid,  
 comfortably vague, and yet reliable, like  
 an old socialist's dream of brotherhood.





## Book Marks

Walker Percy  
*The Thanatos Syndrome*  
 Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 372 pp.

Reviewed by  
 John J. Seydow

To followers of Walker Percy's novels (*The Moviegoer*, *Love in the Ruins*, *The Second Coming*), *The Thanatos Syndrome* features familiar types retracing a familiar terrain. Thomas More, an on-the-mend alcoholic psychiatrist just out of prison, is the eccentric, musing narrator protagonist. Feliciano Parish, containing Percy's usual litany of New Orleans saints and sinners, serves as the locus for More's search and research. But what makes this, Percy's sixth novel, his potentially best selling—and, perhaps, best—work is not character or setting but a new concern for plot.

The syndrome which Dr. More detects contains one unusually bizarre symptom: previously haughty or reserved female patients have become sexually forward. He also observes significant changes in his family and neighbors: his wife has become a bridge prodigy, his children seem to be arithmetical and geographical wizards, and the soccer team at the local academy is playing like Olympic champions.

With the aid of his cousin Lucy, an immunologist with access to the computer data banks of the county and state governments, More discovers that someone is lacing the parish water supply with chemicals siphoned from the near-

by nuclear power plant. Who those someones are, and the rationale behind their actions, dominate most of the action of the novel.

In exposing those culprits, Percy explores the same subjects of his previous novels: love, life, God, the soul, religion, dread, despair and, above all, death. For the Greek word *thanatos* means death; and in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy catalogues those who have contracted a disease fatal to modern civilization—a death-in-life, a malaise in which reflex substitutes for thought, lust displaces love, and human beings shrink into amoral, automaton-like apes. Through his unlikely, non-utopian protagonist, one who modestly sees himself “venturing into the heart of darkness” and “pursuing the secret of one's own self,” Percy ultimately turns the tables on those in power who engineer that death of the soul, and has Thomas More dispense to each villain a dose of more than poetic justice.

In true Walker Percy fashion, this novel also contains heavy doses of allegory and allusion. In addition to characters named Vergil and Milton, Father Simon Rinaldo Smith is likened to St. Simon Stylites. Other references are made to persons as varied as Galahad, B. F. Skinner, Don Quixote, Atticus Finch, and Nicodemus. And, of course, the main character is Thomas More, reminiscent of the 16th century author of *Utopia* who was beheaded by Henry VIII.

While as ironic as his historical namesake, Percy's More adopts a much



## Book Marks

more anti-heroic stance. In a novel abundant with inversions, More, a potentially brilliant scholar and diagnostician, spends countless daylight hours tossing paper airplanes at a bird house, chatting about Nazi Germany in Father Smith's fire tower, and appreciating the duck calls of Uncle Hugh Bob Lipscomb. "Tom is a very creative person," explains one of More's friends: "Like all creative people he has periods of lying fallow." To which More replies, with disarming honesty, "I wasn't lying fallow, Max. I was mostly lying drunk." Yet More, abetted by those other two unlikely heroes and ostensible idiots, overcomes his fecklessness and, with remarkable savvy, defeats the supposed savants—an M.I.T./ Harvard computer genius and his Columbia University psychiatrist-entrepreneur accomplice, turning one literally into a pongid idiot.

Tom More has taken to heart at least one of Father Smith's startling enthymemes: "My brothers, let me tell you where tenderness leads. . . .To the gas chambers!" And thus his victory is that of good over evil, life over death, love over apathy. Therefore while Percy rightly has been compared with fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, that victory is more an amalgamation of T.S. Eliot and Flannery O'Connor, with a dash of Robert Penn Warren to season the plot.

Some will find flaws with this novel, though. In a work which implicitly attacks racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, liberals will fault Percy for excluding Dr. Lucy Lipscomb from the climax and for re-marrying her to Buddy DuPre, for his condescending treatment of Vergil Bon and Max Gottlieb, and for making Tom

More his great white male hope. Conservatives will criticize Percy for endorsing Tom More's devaluation of the work ethic and for satirizing the novel's anti-communist factions. And purists will cavil at the latitude given the first person narrator (who's being addressed by him and when?), the summaries he makes, the coincidences, and his erroneous referring to Marva as Tom More's mother-in-law (after calling her his mother earlier in the novel).

But novel lovers will overlook all of those picayune flaws when enjoying the scenes depicting More and Lucy in the computer room (and shortly thereafter!), More and his "parole officer" in a Mercedes Duck reverberating with Strauss waltzes, Father Smith's confession in the fire tower and his homily at the re-dedication of St. Margaret's Hospice, More with Vergil and Uncle Hugh Bob in a pirogue in a Mississippi River tributary. And I willingly forgave and almost forgot those shortcomings when reveling in the comedy and whimsy displayed by several memorable minor characters like Hudeen, the Mores' black cook, and Chandra, her non-conforming granddaughter; Leroy Ledbetter, the bartender who puts More on to the real bluebird of happiness; Enrique Bosch, an apoplectic ex-Salvadoran; Kev Kevin and Debbie Boudreaux, a former Jesuit and a former Maryknoll nun married—for a while—to each other; and Sheriff "Cooter" Sharp.

In one of the epigraphs to his 1966 novel, *The Last Gentleman*, Walker Percy quotes Romano Guardini: "We know now that the modern world is coming to an end. . .



## Book Marks

Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another. . . the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean." Twenty years later, Percy has his narrator Thomas More list, as one of the things he has learned, "I don't have to plumb the depths of 'modern man' as I used to think I had to. Nor worry about 'the human condition' and suchlike. My scale is smaller."

But just as Thomas More does not bare his neck to the inevitable, so Walker Percy has refused to abandon his belief in the ability of love, even in the ruins of southern Louisiana, not only to transcend but to defeat death. His stage in *The Thanatos Syndrome* may seem parochial, but his scale is as cosmic as ever.



### Remarkable Books

The following are some of the books La Salle University faculty members are reading—not the ones they're assigning. We asked for a few brief remarks answering the question "Why?"

*Andrew Greeley, Confessions of a Parish Priest: An Autobiography.*

This Irish American priest tells the story of his journey from deadly dull Chicago seminary to rich and successful controversial sociologist-novelist. Laced liberally with provocative views, including a defense of celibacy and the failure of the

American hierarchy, most of whom he describes as ranging from the mediocre to the psychopathic. Worth reading even for those who are not fans of Greeley's novels.

—John J. Rooney, Psychology

*Robert Hughes, The Fatal Shore.*

Why not? This is the year of Australia.

—John S. Cziraky, History

*Eugene Lewis, Public Entrepreneurship.*

A very serious book in which the author tries to unearth a theory of political bureaucracy. Whether he succeeds or not, his study offers insight into the monstrous egos and appetites of the likes of J. Edgar Hoover, Hyman Rickover, and Robert Moses.

—Robert Courtney, Political Science

*P.J. O'Rourke, Republican Party Reptile.*

Almost as funny as Rosalind and Jimmy Carter's memoirs.

—John P. Rossi, History

*Tom Clancy, Patriot Games.*

Pow! Take that you fanatical Irish terrorist! Tom Ryan, history prof and part-time CIA genius, won't hold still while you threaten his little family, not to mention the Prince of Wales. You know the good guys will win, but the melodramatic plot keeps you turning pages despite the stereotypes.

—John Keenan, English

*Anne Tyler, The Accidental Tourist.*

I read this book which had nothing to do with any of my courses. I felt pleasurably guilty all the while.

—Patricia Haberstroh, English



DAVID F. CURTIS

## Parasite

Back to teaching again—September mourn—  
 Same old tryst of insincerity  
 Same mimicry of enthusiasm  
 A trick too passively turned to be born,  
 Dishonest act of love, practiced orgasm:  
 The dedicated and venal temerity  
 Of battered and berouged Broadway strumpets  
 Or like me, blowing on those literary trumpets—  
 Keats and Shakespeare—and for what? Joy? Never!  
 But food and lodging, yes, and don't forget  
 Auto insurance and gas, and then regret  
 For shallow chimes and Hyperion strife.  
 Just to hear them remark, "How terribly clever  
 He must be, professing Shakespeare and Keats"—  
 Who never know of my autumn of defeats  
 Or dream a comedy of errors makes a life.

OOOO

DAVID F. CURTIS

## Galilean Sonnets

Idiot teachers who pass as sages  
 Are always advising the young  
 To stop and smell the roses—  
 Safe advice no matter what your age is,  
 Especially since we all have noses.  
 But sniffing a rose takes a minute  
 and even the harried and high-strung  
 Will find there's very little in it.  
 What do you do next, inhale another?  
 But they all smell about the same,  
 So the rationale for pausing is lame:  
 It's hardly worth the considerable bother.  
 Still, if you've never smelled even one,  
 Go to it.

In wiser times they counseled thinking,  
 Believing the young could be taught  
 To teach themselves. They knew, you see,  
 That a life spent without blinking  
 Is worthless; and since ideation is free  
 And priceless, keeps us growing and alive,  
 They spurned hedonism for thought  
 And made their young charges strive.  
 Yet if you will lose yourself in indulgence  
 And stop growth in its tracks,  
 Then fend off cerebral attacks  
 And revel in rosy refulgence.  
 But if you'd prefer to circle the sun,  
 Eschew it.

OOOO



## Contributors

EDWARD CALLAN studied and taught in South Africa in the 1940s. He edited Alan Paton's political writings in *The Long View* (1969). His more recent books include *Yeats on Yeats* (Dolmen, 1981), *Alan Paton* (Rev. ed., G.K. Hall, 1982), and *Auden* (O.U.P., 1983). His play on W.B. Yeats, *Come Dance With Me in Ireland*, will be staged by the Irish National Theatre during the Dublin Millennium Festival, June 1988.

JERRY CROPP, a La Salle alumnus, is a writer and account executive with LSI Communications. This marks his first appearance in these pages.

DAVID F. CURTIS lives in West Haven, Connecticut. He teaches for a living and writes verse when the world is too much with him.

LESTER GOLDBERG'S earlier story in this magazine was chosen for the O. Henry anthology. His novel, *In Siberia It Is Very Cold*, was published by Dembner Books. The University of Illinois Press has published a collection of his stories; he has been awarded a fellowship by the National Endowment of the Arts and received awards from the New Jersey State Council of the Arts and PEN..

ELLEN HERMAN lives in Los Angeles. Her fiction has appeared in *Other Voices*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *The Chariton Review*. This is her first appearance in *Four Quarters*.

BILL LYON is a graduate in English from the University of Illinois. Since 1972 he has been writing a very popular sports column for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He has a flair for aphorisms, a selection of which appears in *So They Say*.

ANDREW LYTLE is the former editor of the *Sewanee Review* and a distinguished novelist and teacher of writing. CLAUDE KOCH was one of his students at the University of Florida. Mr. Lytle was recently honored as the recipient of the Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters.

J. D. McCLATCHY has recently published his second collection of poems, *Stars Principal* (Macmillan), and an edition of James Merrill's prose, *Recitative* (North Point). He has taught creative writing at both Yale and Princeton. He served as Associate Editor of *Four Quarters* in the 1970s while teaching at La Salle. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship this year and spent several months in London working on a libretto and a new book..

DERVLA MURPHY of County Waterford, Republic of Ireland, is a well-known travel writer. Her books have included acclaimed studies of Nepal, Ethiopia, and India. She also authored a poignant study of the Northern Irish crisis, *A Place Apart*, for which she received the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize in 1978.



## Contributors

JOYCE CAROL OATES is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Lecturer at Princeton University. She is the author of the recent story collection, *Raven's Wing*. In 1986 she was awarded the O. Henry Prize for Continued Achievement in the Short Story. In 1987 she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

HUGH O'DONNELL, a priest in Dublin, won the John Player Award in the William Allingham poetry competition in Ballyshannon. His first "slim volume," *Mrs. Moody's Blues See Red* appeared in 1980; another collection is due out this spring.

SEAMUS O'HALLURAIN is a Salesian missionary priest who has worked in Latin America and Africa. He has published a book of stories entitled *Go Not Gently: And Other Third World Stories*. His short stories have appeared in the *Salesian Bulletin* and one of them was chosen Story of the Month by the *Irish Sunday Independent*.

RAYMOND J. PENTZELL is a graduate of La Salle who now chairs the Humanities Division at Hillsdale College, Michigan. He also heads the Speech and Theatre Department there. His drawings reflect his life-long interest in cartooning, most recently influenced by the work of Gary Larson of *The Far Side* fame.

JOHN J. SEYDOW is a Professor of English at La Salle whose special interest is in American literature. A frustrated athlete and raconteur, he has recently

been working on the career of Ernest Hemingway.

DAVID R. SLAVITT'S "Circus Costumes" will appear in his latest collection, *Equinox*, which Louisiana State University Press will bring out next October.

WILLIAM F. VAN WERT is a prolific short story writer whose work has appeared in both the *O. Henry Collection* and *Best American Short Stories*. He teaches film and creative writing at Temple University. His most recent stories have appeared in the *Georgia Review* and the *Yale Review*.

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